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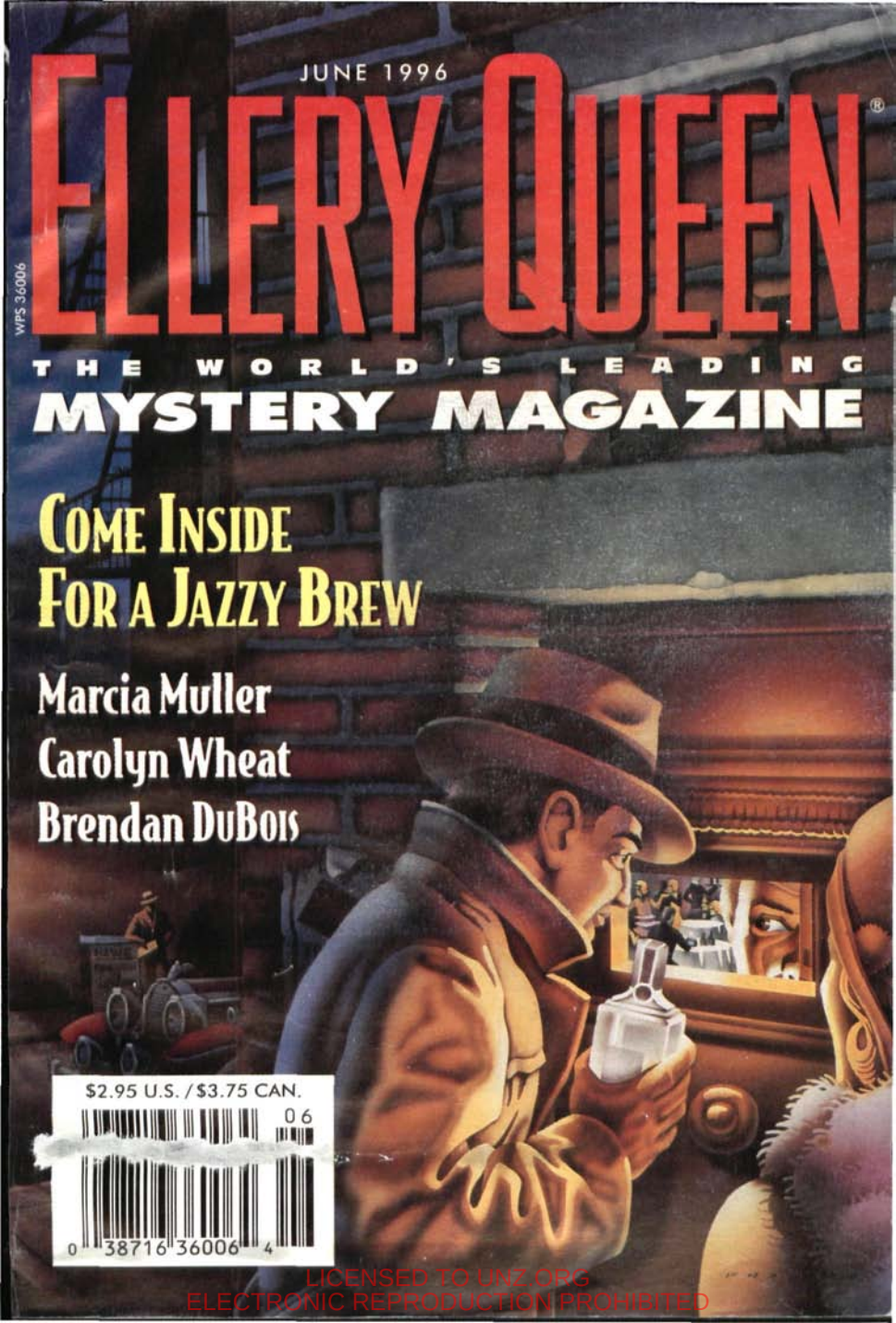

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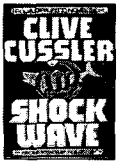

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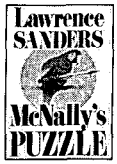

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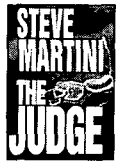

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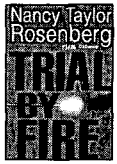

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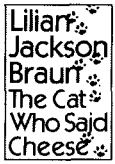

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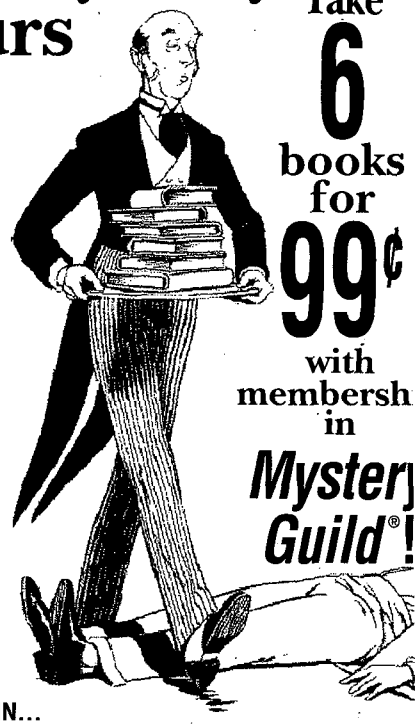

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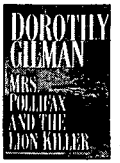

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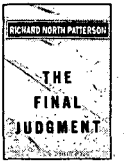

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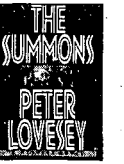

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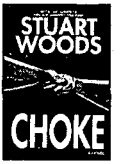

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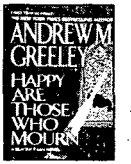

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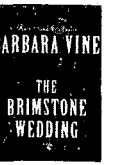

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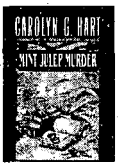

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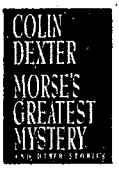

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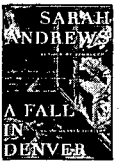

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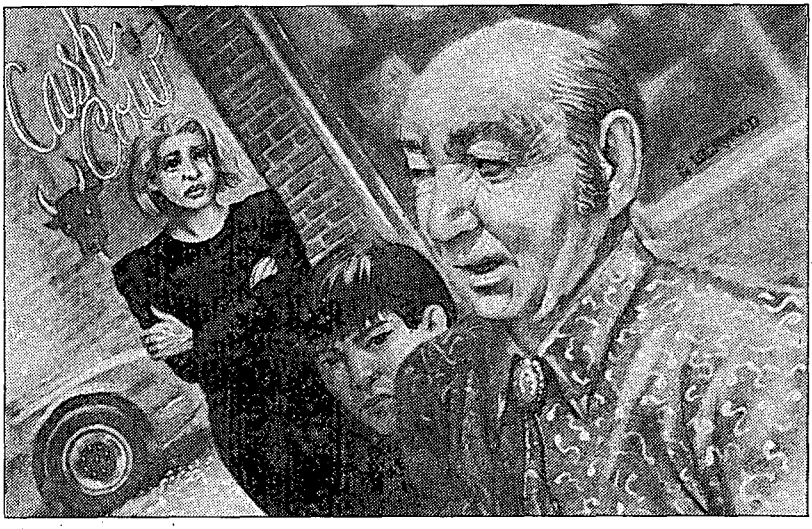

Art by Todd Lockwood

THE HOLES IN THE SYSTEM

by Marcia Muller

There are some days that just ought to be called off. Mondays are always hideous: The trouble starts when I dribble toothpaste all over my clothes or lock my keys in the car and doesn't let up till I stub my toe on the bedstand at night. Tuesdays are usually when the morning paper doesn't get delivered. Wednesdays are better, but if I get to feeling optimistic and go to aerobics class at the Y, chances are ten to one that I'll wrench my back. Thursdays—forget it. And by five on Friday, all I want to do is crawl under the covers and hide.

You can see why I love weekends.

The day I got assigned to the Boydston case was a Tuesday.

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Cautious optimism, that was what I was nursing. The paper lay folded tidily on the front steps of All Souls Legal Cooperative — where I both live and work as a private investigator. I read it and drank my coffee, not even burning my tongue. Nobody I knew had died, and there was even a cheerful story below the fold in the Metro section. By the time I'd looked at the comics and found all five strips that I bother to read were funny, I was feeling downright perky.

Well, why not? I wasn't making a lot of money, but my job was secure. The attic room I occupied was snug and comfy. I had a boyfriend, and even if the relationship was about as deep as a desert stream on the Fourth of July, he could be taken most anyplace. And to top it off, this wasn't a bad hair day.

Marcia Muller earned a permanent place in the history of crime fiction in 1977 when she introduced readers to the first independently employed woman P.I., Sharon McCone, in the novel *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*. Before McCone, female investigators in P.I. stories were primarily depicted as partners to husbands or other male leads. Nearly twenty years after her debut, Ms. Muller's P.I. continues to fascinate readers; she has a minor role in this new story, in which her assistant, Rae Kelleher, takes center stage.

All that smug reflection made me feel charitable toward my fellow humans — or at least my coworkers and their clients — so I refolded the paper and carried it from the kitchen of our big Victorian to the front parlor- and waiting-room so others could partake. A man was sitting on the shabby maroon sofa: bald and chubby, dressed in lime green polyester pants and a strangely patterned green, blue, and yellow shirt that reminded me of drawings of sperm cells. One thing for sure, he'd never get run over by a bus while he was wearing that getup.

He looked at me as I set the paper on the coffee table and said, "How ya doin', little lady?"

Now, there's some contention that the word "lady" is demeaning. Frankly, it doesn't bother me; when I hear it I know I'm looking

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halfway presentable and haven't got something disgusting caught between my front teeth. No, what rankled was the word "little." When you're five foot three the word reminds you of things you'd just as soon not dwell on — like being unable to see over people's heads at parades, or the little-girly clothes that designers of petite sizes are always trying to foist on you. "Little," especially at nine in the morning, doesn't cut it.

I glared at the guy. Unfortunately, he'd gotten to his feet and I had to look up.

He didn't notice I was annoyed; maybe he was nearsighted. "Sure looks like it's gonna be a fine day," he said.

Now I identified his accent—pure Texas. Another strike against him, because of Uncle Roy, but that's another story.

"It *would've* been a nice day," I muttered.

"Ma'am?"

That did it! The first — and last — time somebody had gotten away with calling me "ma'am" was on my twenty-eighth birthday two weeks before, when a bagboy tried to help me out of Safeway with my two feather-light sacks of groceries. It was not a precedent I wanted followed.

Speaking more clearly, I said, "It would've been a nice day, except for you."

He frowned. "What'd I do?"

"Try 'little,' a Texas accent, and 'ma'am'!"

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"Aaargh!" I fled the parlor and ran up the stairs to the office of my boss, Sharon McCone.

Sharon is my friend, mentor, and sometimes — heaven help me — custodian of my honesty. She's been all those things since she hired me a few years ago to assist her at the co-op. Not that our association is always smooth sailing: She can be a stern taskmaster and she harbors a devilish sense of humor that surfaces at inconvenient times. But she's always been there for me, even during the death throes of my marriage to my pig-selfish, perpetual-student husband, Doug Grayson. And ever since I've stopped referring to him as "that bastard Doug" she's decided I'm a grown-up who can be trusted to manage her own life — within limits.

That morning she was sitting behind her desk with her chair swiveled around so she could look out the bay window at the front

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of the Victorian. I've found her in that pose hundreds of times: sunk low on her spine, long legs crossed, dark eyes brooding. The view is of dowdy houses across the triangular park that divides the street, and usually hazed by San Francisco fog, but it doesn't matter; whatever she's seeing is strictly inside her head, and she says she gets her best insights into her cases that way.

I stepped into the office and cleared my throat. Slowly Shar turned, looking at me as if I were a stranger. Then her eyes cleared. "Rae, hi. Nice work on closing the Anderson file so soon."

"Thanks. I found the others you left on my desk; they're pretty routine. You have anything else for me?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." She smiled slyly and slid a manila folder across the desk. "Why don't you take this client?"

I opened the folder and studied the information sheet stapled inside. All it gave was a name—Darrin Boydston—and an address on Mission Street. Under the job description Shar had noted "background check."

"Another one?" I asked, letting my voice telegraph my disappointment.

"Uh-huh. I think you'll find it interesting."

"Why?"

She waved a slender hand at me. "Go! It'll be a challenge."

Now, that *did* make me suspicious. "If it's such a challenge, how come you're not handling it?"

For an instant her eyes sparkled. She doesn't like it when I hint that she skims the best cases for herself—although that's exactly what she does, and I don't blame her. "Just go see him."

"He'll be at this address?"

"No, he's downstairs. I got done talking with him ten minutes ago."

"Downstairs? *Where* downstairs?"

"In the parlor."

Oh, God!

She smiled again. "Lime green, with a Texas accent."

"So," Darrin Boydston said, "did y'all come back down to chew me out some more?"

"I'm sorry about that." I handed him my card. "Ms. McCone has assigned me to your case."

He studied it and looked me up and down. "You promise to keep a civil tongue in your head?"

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"I said I was sorry."

"Well, you damn near ruint my morning."

How many more times was I going to have to apologize?

"Let's get goin', little lady." He started for the door.

I winced and asked, "Where?"

"My place. I got somebody I want you to meet."

Boydston's car was a white Lincoln Continental—beautiful machine, except for the bull's horns mounted on the front grille. I stared at them in horror.

"Pretty, aren't they?" he said, opening the passenger's door.

"I'll follow you in my car," I told him.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

As I got into the Ramblin' Wreck—my ancient, exhaust-belching Rambler American—I looked back and saw Boydston staring at *it* in horror.

Boydston's place was a storefront on Mission a few blocks down from my Safeway—an area that could do with some urban renewal and just might get it, if the upwardly mobile ethnic groups that're moving into the neighborhood get their way. It shared the building with a Thai restaurant and a Filipino travel agency. In its front window red neon tubing spelled out THE CASH COW, but the bucking outline below the letters was a bull. I imagined Boydston trying to reach a decision: call it the Cash Cow and have a good name but a dumb graphic; call it the Cash Bull and have a dumb name but a good graphic; or just say the hell with it and mix genders.

But what kind of establishment was this?

My client took the first available parking space, leaving me to fend for myself. When I finally found another and walked back two blocks he'd already gone inside.

Chivalry is dead. Sometimes I think common courtesy's obit is about to be published too.

When I went into the store, the first thing I noticed was a huge potted barrel cactus, and the second was dozens of guitars hanging from the ceiling. A rack of worn cowboy boots completed the picture.

Texas again. The state that spawned the likes of Uncle Roy was going to keep getting in my face all day long.

The room was full of glass showcases that displayed an amazing

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assortment of stuff: rings, watches, guns, cameras, fishing reels, kitchen gadgets, small tools, knickknacks, silverware, even a metronome. There was a whole section of electronic equipment like TVs and VCRs, a jumble of probably obsolete computer gear, a fleet of vacuum cleaners poised to roar to life and tidy the world, enough exercise equipment to trim down half the population, and a jukebox that just then was playing a country song by Shar's brother-in-law, Ricky Savage. Delicacy prevents me from describing what his voice does to my libido.

Darrin Boydston stood behind a high counter, tapping on a keyboard. On the wall behind him a sign warned CUSTOMERS MUST PRESENT TICKET TO CLAIM MERCHANDISE. I'm not too quick most mornings, but I did manage to figure out that the Cash Cow was a pawnshop.

"Y'all took long enough," my client said. "You gonna charge me for the time you spent parking?"

I sighed. "Your billable hours start now." Then I looked at my watch and made a mental note of the time.

He turned the computer off, motioned for me to come around the counter, and led me through a door into a warehouse area. Its shelves were crammed with more of the kind of stuff he had out front. Halfway down the center aisle he made a right turn and took me past small appliances: blenders, food processors, toasters, electric woks, pasta makers, even an ancient pressure cooker. It reminded me of the one the grandmother who raised me used to have, and I wrinkled my nose at it, thinking of those sweltering late-summer days when she'd make me help her with the yearly canning. No wonder I resist the womanly household arts!

Boydston said, "They buy these gizmos 'cause they think they need 'em. Then they find out they don't need and can't afford 'em. And then it all ends up in my lap." He sounded exceptionally cheerful about this particular brand of human folly, and I supposed he had good reason.

He led me at a fast clip toward the back of the warehouse—so fast that I had to trot to keep up with him. One of the other problems with being short is that you're forever running along behind taller people. Since I'd already decided to hate Darrin Boydston, I also decided he was walking fast to spite me.

At the end of the next-to-last aisle we came upon a thin man in a white T-shirt and black work pants who was moving boxes from the shelves to a dolly. Although Boydston and I were making

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plenty of noise, he didn't hear us come up. My client put his hand on the man's shoulder, and he stiffened. When he turned I saw he was only a boy, no more than twelve or thirteen, with the fine features and thick black hair of a Eurasian. The look in his eyes reminded me of an abused kitten my boyfriend Willie had taken in: afraid and resigned to further terrible experiences. He glanced from me to Boydston, and when my client nodded reassuringly, the fear faded to remoteness.

Boydston said to me, "Meet Daniel."

"Hello, Daniel." I held out my hand. He looked at it, then at Boydston. He nodded again, and Daniel touched my fingers, moving back quickly as if they were hot.

"Daniel," Boydston said, "doesn't speak or hear. Speech therapist I know met him, says he's prob'ly been deaf and mute since he was born."

The boy was watching his face intently. I said, "He reads lips or understands signing, though."

"Does some lip reading, yeah. But no signing. For that you gotta have schooling. Far as I can tell, Daniel hasn't. But him and me, we worked out a personal kind of language to get by."

Daniel tugged at Boydston's sleeve and motioned at the shelves, eyebrows raised. Boydston nodded, then pointed to his watch, held up five fingers, and pointed to the front of the building. Daniel nodded and turned back to his work. Boydston said, "You see?"

"Uh-huh. You two communicate pretty well. How'd he come to work for you?"

My client began leading me back to the store — walking slower now. "The way it went, I found him all huddled up in the back doorway one morning 'bout six weeks ago when I opened up. He was damn near froze but dressed in clean clothes and a new jacket. Was in good shape, 'cept for some healed-over cuts on his face. And he had this laminated card . . . wait, I'll show you." He held the door for me, then rummaged through a drawer below the counter.

The card was a blue three-by-five encased in clear plastic; on it somebody had typed I WILL WORK FOR FOOD AND A PLACE TO SLEEP. I DO NOT SPEAK OR HEAR, BUT I AM A GOOD WORKER. PLEASE HELP ME.

"So you gave him a job?"

Boydston sat down on a stool. "Yeah. He sleeps in a little room off the warehouse and cooks on a hotplate. Mostly stuff outta

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cans. Every week I give him cash; he brings back the change — won't take any more than what his food costs, and that's not much."

I turned the card over. Turned over my opinion of Darrin Boydston, too. "How d'you know his name's Daniel?"

"I don't. That's just what I call him."

"Why Daniel?"

He looked embarrassed and brushed at a speck of lint on the leg of his pants. "Had a best buddy in high school down in Amarillo. Daniel Atkins. Got killed in 'Nam." He paused. "Funny, me giving his name to a slope kid when they were the ones that killed him." Another pause. "Of course, this Daniel wasn't even born then, none of that business was his fault. And there's something about him . . . I don't know, he just reminds me of my buddy. Don't suppose old Danny would mind none."

"I'm sure he wouldn't." Damn, it was getting harder and harder to hate Boydston! I decided to let go of it. "Okay," I said, "my case-file calls for a background check. I take it you want me to find out who Daniel is."

"Yeah. Right now he doesn't exist—officially, I mean. He hasn't got a birth certificate, can't get a social security number. That means I can't put him on the payroll, and he can't get government help. No classes where he can learn the stuff I can't teach him. No SSI payments or Medicare, either. My therapist friend says he's one of the people that slip through the cracks in the system."

The cracks are more like yawning holes, if you ask me. I said, "I've got to warn you, Mr. Boydston: Daniel may be in the country illegally."

"You think I haven't thought of that? Hell, I'm one of the people that voted for Prop One-eighty-seven. Keep those foreigners from coming here and taking jobs from decent citizens. Don't give 'em nothin' and maybe they'll go home and quit using up my tax dollar. That was before I met Daniel." He scowled. "*Damn,* I hate moral dilemmas! I'll tell you one thing, though: This is a good kid, he deserves a chance. If he's here illegally . . . well, I'll deal with it somehow."

I liked his approach to his moral dilemma; I'd used it myself a time or ten. "Okay," I said, "tell me everything you know about him."

"Well, there're the clothes he had on when I found him. They're

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in this sack; take a look." He hauled a grocery bag from under the counter and handed it to me.

I pulled the clothing out: rugby shirt in white, green, and navy; navy cords; navy-and-tan down jacket. They were practically new, but the labels had been cut out.

"Lands' End?" I said. "Eddie Bauer?"

"One of those, but who can tell which?"

I couldn't, but I had a friend who could. "Can I take these?"

"Sure, but don't let Daniel see you got them. He's real attached to 'em, cried when I took 'em away to be cleaned the first time."

"Somebody cared about him, to dress him well and have this card made up. Laminating like that is a simple process, though; you can get it done in print shops."

"Hell, you could get it done *here*. I got in one of those laminating gizmos a week ago; belongs to a printer who's having a hard time of it, checks his shop equipment in and out like this was a lending library."

"What else can you tell me about Daniel? What's he like?"

Boydston considered. "Well, he's proud—the way he brings back the change from the money I give him tells me that. He's smart; he picked up on the warehouse routine easy, and he already knew how to cook. Whoever his people are, they don't have much; he knew what a hotplate was, but when I showed him a microwave it scared him. And he's got a tic about labels—cuts 'em out of the clothes I give him. There's more, too." He looked toward the door; Daniel was peeking hesitantly around its jamb. Boydston waved for him to come in and added, "I'll let Daniel do the telling."

The boy came into the room, eyes lowered shyly—or fearfully. Boydston looked at him till he looked back. Speaking very slowly and mouthing the words carefully, he asked, "Where are you from?"

Daniel pointed at the floor.

"San Francisco?"

Nod.

"This district?"

Frown.

"Mission district? Mis-sion?"

Nod.

"Your momma, where is she?"

Daniel bit his lip.

"Your momma?"

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He raised his hand and waved.

"Gone away?" I asked Boydston.

"Gone away or dead. How long, Daniel?" When the boy didn't respond, he repeated, "How long?"

Shrug.

"Time confuses him," Boydston said. "Daniel, your daddy — where is he?"

The boy's eyes narrowed and he made a sudden violent gesture toward the door.

"Gone away?"

Curt nod.

"How long?"

Shrug.

"How long, Daniel?"

After a moment he held up two fingers.

"Days?"

Headshake.

"Weeks?"

Frown.

"Months?"

Another frown.

"Years?"

Nod.

"Thanks, Daniel." Boydston smiled at him and motioned to the door. "You can go back to work now." He watched the boy leave, eyes troubled, then asked me, "So what d'you think?"

"Well, he's got good linguistic abilities; somebody bothered to teach him words — probably the mother. His recollections seem scrambled. He's fairly sure when the father left, less sure about the mother. That could mean she went away or died recently and he hasn't found a way to mesh it with the rest of his personal history. Whatever happened, he was left to fend for himself."

"Can you do anything for him?"

"I'm sure going to try."

My best lead on Daniel's identity was the clothing. There had to be a reason for the labels being cut out — and I didn't think it was because of a tic on the boy's part. No, somebody had wanted to conceal the origins of the duds, and when I found out where they'd come from I could pursue my investigation from that angle. I left the Cash Cow, got in the Ramblin' Wreck, and when it finally

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stopped coughing, drove to the six-story building on Brannan Street south of Market where my friend Janie labors in what she calls the rag trade. Right now she works for a T-shirt manufacturer—and there've been years when I would've gone naked without her gifts of overruns—but during her career she's touched on every area of the business; if anybody could steer me toward the manufacturer of Daniel's clothes, she was the one. I gave them to her and she told me to call later. Then I set out on the trail of a Mission district printer who had a laminating machine.

Print and copy shops were in abundant supply there. A fair number of them did laminating work, but none recognized — or would own up to recognizing—Daniel's three-by-five card. It took me nearly all day to canvass them, except for the half-hour when I had a beer and a burrito at La Tacqueria, and by four o'clock I was totally discouraged. So I stopped at my favorite ice-cream shop, called Janie and found she was in a meeting, and to ease my frustration had a double-scoop caramel swirl in a chocolate chip cookie cone.

No wonder I'm usually carrying five spare pounds!

The shop had a section of little plastic tables and chairs, and I rested my weary feet there, planning to check in at the office and then call it a day. If turning the facts of the case over and over in my mind all evening could be considered calling it a day. . . .

Shar warned me about that right off the bat. "If you like this business and stick with it," she'd said, "you'll work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You'll think you're not working because you'll be at a party or watching TV or even in bed with your husband. And then all of a sudden you'll realize that half your mind's thinking about your current case and searching for a solution. Frankly, it doesn't make for much of a life."

Actually it makes for more than one life. Sometimes I think the time I spend on stakeouts or questioning people or prowling the city belongs to another Rae, one who has no connection to the Rae who goes to parties and watches TV and—now—sleeps with her boyfriend. I'm divided, but I don't mind it. And if Rae-the-investigator intrudes on the off-duty Rae's time, that's okay. Because the off-duty Rae gets to watch Rae-the-investigator make her moves—fascinated and a little envious.

Schizoid? Maybe. But I can't help but live and breathe the business. By now that's as natural as breathing air.

So I sat on the little plastic chair savoring my caramel swirl and

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chocolate chips and realized that the half of my mind that wasn't on sweets had come up with a weird little coincidence. Licking ice-cream dribbles off my fingers, I went back to the phone and called Darrin Boydston. The printer who had hocked his laminating machine was named Jason Hill, he told me, and his shop was Quik Prints, on Mission near Geneva.

I'd gone there earlier this afternoon. When I showed Jason Hill the laminated card he'd looked kind of funny but claimed he didn't do that kind of work, and there hadn't been any equipment in evidence to brand him a liar. Actually, he wasn't a liar; he didn't do that kind of work *anymore.*

Hill was closing up when I got to Quik Prints, and he looked damned unhappy to see me again. I took the laminated card from my pocket and slapped it into his hand. "The machine you made this on is living at the Cash Cow right now," I said. "You want to tell me about it?"

Hill—one of those bony-thin guys that you want to take home and fatten up—sighed. "You from Child Welfare or what?"

"I'm working for your pawnbroker, Darrin Boydston." I showed him the ID he hadn't bothered to look at earlier. "Who had the card made up?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"For the kid's sake." He switched the Open sign in the window to Closed and came out onto the sidewalk. "Mind if we walk to my bus stop while we talk?"

I shook my head and fell in next to him. The famous San Francisco fog was in, gray and dirty, making the gray and dirty Outer Mission even more depressing than usual. As we headed toward the intersection of Mission and Geneva, Hill told me his story.

"I found the kid on the sidewalk about seven weeks ago. It was five in the morning—I'd come in early for a rush job—and he was dazed and banged up and bleeding. Looked like he'd been mugged. I took him into the shop and was going to call the cops, but he started crying—upset about the blood on his down jacket. I sponged it off, and by the time I got back from the restroom, he was sweeping the print-room floor. I really didn't have time to deal with the cops, so I just let him sweep. He kind of made himself indispensable."

"And then?"

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"He cried when I tried to put him outside that night, so I got him some food and let him sleep in the shop. He had coffee ready the next morning and helped me take out the trash. I still thought I should call the cops, but I was worried: He couldn't tell them who he was or where he lived; he'd end up in some detention center or foster home and his folks might never find him. I grew up in foster homes myself; I know all about the system. He was a sweet kid and deserved better than that. You know?"

"I know."

"Well, I couldn't figure *what* to do with him. I couldn't keep him at the shop much longer — the landlord's nosy and always on the premises. And I couldn't take him home — I live in a tiny studio with my girlfriend and three dogs. So after a week I got an idea: I'd park him someplace with a laminated card asking for a job; I knew he wouldn't lose it or throw it away, because he loved the laminated stuff and saved all the discards."

"Why'd you leave him at the Cash Cow?"

"Mr. Boydston's got a reputation for taking care of people. He's helped me out plenty of times."

"How?"

"Well, when he sends out the sixty-day notices saying you should claim your stuff or it'll be sold, as long as you go in and make a token payment, he'll hang onto it. He sees you're hurting, he'll give you more than the stuff's worth. He bends over backwards to make a loan." We got to the bus stop and Hill joined the rush-hour line. "And I was right about Mr. Boydston helping the kid, too," he added. "When I took the machine in last week, there he was, sweeping the sidewalk."

"He recognize you?"

"Didn't see me. Before I crossed the street, Mr. Boydston sent him on some errand. The kid's in good hands."

Funny how every now and then when you think the whole city's gone to hell, you discover there're a few good people left. . . .

Wednesday morning: cautious optimism again, but I wasn't going to push my luck by attending an aerobics class. Today I'd put all my energy into the Boydston case.

First, a call to Janie, whom I hadn't been able to reach at home the night before.

"The clothes were manufactured by a company called Casuals,

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Incorporated," she told me. "They only sell by catalogue, and their offices and factory are on Third Street."

"Any idea why the labels were cut out?"

"Well, at first I thought they might've been overstocks that were sold through one of the discounters like Ross, but that doesn't happen often with the catalogue outfits. So I took a close look at the garments and saw they've got defects — nothing major, but they wouldn't want to pass them off as first quality."

"Where would somebody get hold of them?"

"A factory store, if the company has one. I didn't have time to check."

It wasn't much of a lead, but even a little lead's better than nothing at all. I promised Janie I'd buy her a beer sometime soon and headed for the industrial corridor along Third Street.

Casuals, Inc. didn't have an on-site factory store, so I went into the front office to ask if there was one in another location. No, the receptionist told me, they didn't sell garments found to be defective.

"What happens to them?"

"Usually they're offered at a discount to employees and their families."

That gave me an idea, and five minutes later I was talking with a Mr. Fong in personnel. "A single mother with a deaf-mute son? That would be Mae Jones. She worked here as a seamstress for . . . let's see . . . a little under a year."

"But she's not employed here anymore?"

"No. We had to lay off a number of people, and those with the least seniority are the first to go."

"Do you know where she's working now?"

"Sorry, I don't."

"Mr. Fong, is Mae Jones a documented worker?"

"Green card was in order. We don't hire illegals."

"And you have an address for her?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I can't give that out."

"I understand, but I think you'll want to make an exception in this case. You see, Mae's son was found wandering the Mission seven weeks ago, the victim of a mugging. I'm trying to reunite them."

Mr. Fong didn't hesitate to fetch her file and give me the

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address, on Lucky Street in the Mission. Maybe, I thought, this was my lucky break.

The house was a Victorian that had been sided with concrete block and painted a weird shade of purple. Sagging steps led to a porch where six mailboxes hung. None of the names on them was Jones. I rang all the bells and got no answer. Now what? "Can I help you?" an Asian-accented voice said behind me. It belonged to a stooped old woman carrying a fishnet bag full of vegetables. Her eyes, surrounded by deep wrinkles, were kind. "I'm looking for Mae Jones." The woman had been taking out a keyring. Now she jammed it into the pocket of her loose-fitting trousers and backed up against the porch railing. Fear made her nostrils flare.

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"You are from them!"

"Them? Who?"

"I know nothing."

"Please don't be scared. I'm trying to help Mrs. Jones's son."

"Tommy? Where is Tommy?"

I explained about Jason Hill finding him and Darrin Boydston taking him in.

When I finished the woman had relaxed a little. "I am so happy one of them is safe."

"Please, tell me about the Joneses."

She hesitated, looking me over. Then she nodded as if I'd passed some kind of test and took me inside to a small apartment furnished with things that made the thrift-shop junk in my nest at All Souls look like Chippendale. Although I would've rather she tell her story quickly, she insisted on making tea. When we were finally settled with little cups like the ones I'd bought years ago at Bargain Bazaar in Chinatown, she began.

"Mae went away eight weeks ago today. I thought Tommy was with her. When she did not pay her rent, the landlord went inside the apartment. He said they left everything."

"Has the apartment been rented to someone else?"

She nodded. "Mae and Tommy's things are stored in the garage. Did you say it was seven weeks ago that Tommy was found?"

"Give or take a few days."

"Poor boy. He must have stayed in the apartment waiting for his mother. He is so quiet and can take care of himself."

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"What d'you suppose he was doing on Mission Street near Geneva, then?"

"Maybe looking for her." The woman's face was frightened again.

"Why there?" I asked.

She stared down into her teacup. After a bit she said, "You know Mae lost her job at the sewing factory?"

I nodded.

"It was a good job, and she is a good seamstress, but times are bad and she could not find another job."

"And then?"

". . . There is a place on Geneva Avenue. It looks like an apartment house, but it is really a sewing factory. The owners advertise by word of mouth among the Asian immigrants. They say they pay high wages, give employees meals and a place to live, and do not ask questions. They hire many who are here illegally."

"Is Mae an illegal?"

"No. She was married to an American serviceman and has her permanent green card. Tommy was born in San Francisco. But a few years ago her husband divorced her and she lost her medical benefits. She is in poor health, she has tuberculosis. Her money was running out, and she was desperate. I warned her, but she wouldn't listen."

"Warned her against what?"

"There is talk about that factory. The building is fenced and the fences are topped with razor wire. The windows are boarded and barred. They say that once a worker enters she is not allowed to leave. They say workers are forced to sew eighteen hours a day for very low wages. They say that the cost of food is taken out of their pay, and that ten people sleep in a room large enough for two."

"That's slavery! Why doesn't the city do something?"

The old woman shrugged. "The city has no proof and does not care. The workers are only immigrants. They are not important."

I felt a real rant coming on and fought to control it. I've lived in San Francisco for seven years, since I graduated from Berkeley, a few miles and light years across the Bay, and I'm getting sick and tired of the so-called important people. The city is beautiful and lively and tolerant, but there's a core of citizens who think nobody and nothing counts but them and their concerns. Someday when I'm in charge of the world (an event I fully expect to happen, espe-

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cially when I've had a few beers), they'll have to answer to *me* for their high-handed behavior.

"Okay," I said, "tell me exactly where this place is, and we'll see what we can do about it."

"Slavery, plain and simple," Shar said.

"Right."

"Something's got to be done about it."

"Right."

We were sitting in a booth at the Remedy Lounge, our favorite tavern down the hill from All Souls on Mission Street. She was drinking white wine, I was drinking beer, and it wasn't but three in the afternoon. But McCone and I have found that some of our best ideas come to us when we tilt a couple. I'd spent the last four hours casing—oops, I'm not supposed to call it that—conducting a surveillance on the building on Geneva Avenue. Sure looked suspicious—trucks coming and going, but no workers leaving at lunchtime.

"But what can be done?" I asked. "Who do we contact?"

She considered. "Illegals? U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. False imprisonment? City police and district attorney's office. Substandard working conditions? OSHA, Department of Labor, State Employment Development Division. Take your pick."

"Which is best to start with?"

"None—yet. You've got no proof of what's going on there."

"Then we'll just have to get proof, won't we?"

"Uh-huh."

"You and I both used to work in security. Ought to be a snap to get into that building."

"Maybe."

"All we need is access. Take some pictures. Tape a statement from one of the workers. Are you with me?"

She nodded. "I'm with you. And as backup, why don't we take Willie?"

"*My* Willie? The diamond king of northern California? Shar, this is an investigation, not a date!"

"Before he opened those discount jewelry stores Willie was a professional fence, as you may recall. And although he won't admit it, I happen to know he personally stole a lot of the items he moved. Willie has talents we can use."

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"My tennis elbow hurts! Why're you making me do this?"

I glared at Willie. "Shh! You've never played tennis in your life."

"The doc told me most people who've got it have never played."

"Just be quiet and cut that wire."

"How d'you know there isn't an alarm?"

"Shar and I have checked. Trust us."

"I trust you two, I'll probably end up in San Quentin."

"Cut!"

Willie snipped a fair segment out of the razor wire topping the chain-link fence. I climbed over first, nearly doing myself grievous personal injury as I swung over the top. Shar followed, and then the diamond king—making unseemly grunting noises. His tall frame was encased in dark sweats tonight, and they accentuated the beginnings of a beer belly.

As we each dropped to the ground, we quickly moved into the shadow of the three-story frame building and flattened against its wall. Willie wheezed and pushed his longish hair out of his eyes. I gave Shar a look that said, *Some asset you invited along.* She shrugged apologetically.

According to plan we began inching around the building, searching for a point of entry. We didn't see any guards. If the factory employed them, it would be for keeping people in; it had probably never occurred to the owners that someone might actually *want* in.

After about three minutes Shar came to a stop and I bumped into her. She steadied me and pointed down. A foot off the ground was an opening that had been boarded up; the plywood was splintered and coming loose. I squatted and took a look at it. Some kind of duct—maybe people-size. Together we pulled the board off.

Yep, a duct. But not very big. Willie wouldn't fit through it—which was fine by me, because I didn't want him alerting everybody in the place with his groaning. I'd fit, but Shar would fit better still.

I motioned for her to go first.

She made an after-you gesture.

I shook my head.

It's your case, she mouthed.

I sighed, handed her the camera loaded with infrared film that I carried, and started squeezing through.

I've got to admit that I have all sorts of mild phobias. I get

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twitchy in crowds, and I'm not fond of heights, and I hate to fly, and small places make my skin crawl. This duct was a *very* small space. I pushed onward, trying to keep my mind on other things—such as Tommy and Mae Jones.

When my hands reached the end of the duct I pulled hard, then moved them around till I felt a concrete floor about two feet below. I wriggled forward, felt my foot kick something, and heard Shar grunt. *Sorry.* The room I slid down into was pitch black. I waited till Shar was crouched beside me, then whispered, "D'you have your flashlight?"

She handed me the camera, fumbled in her pocket, and then I saw streaks of light bleeding around the fingers she placed over its bulb. We waited, listening. No one stirred, no one spoke. After a moment Shar took her hand away from the flash and began shining its beam around. A storage room full of sealed cardboard boxes, with a door at the far side. We exchanged glances and began moving through the stacked cartons.

When we got to the door I put my ear to it and listened. No sound. I turned the knob slowly. Unlocked. I eased the door open. A dimly lighted hallway. There was another door with a lighted window set into it at the far end. Shar and I moved along opposite walls and stopped on either side of the door. I went up on tiptoe and peeked through the corner of the glass.

Inside was a factory: row after row of sewing machines, all making jittery up-and-down motions and clacking away. Each was operated by an Asian woman. Each woman slumped wearily as she fed the fabric through.

It was twelve-thirty in the morning, and they still had them sewing!

I drew back and motioned for Shar to have a look. She did, then turned to me, lips tight, eyes ablaze.

Pictures? she mouthed.

I shook my head. *Can't risk being seen.*

Now what?

I shrugged.

She frowned and started back the other way, slipping from door to door and trying each knob. Finally she stopped and pointed to one with a placard that said STAIRWAY. I followed her through it and we started up. The next floor was offices — locked up and dark. We went back to the stairwell, climbed another flight. On the landing I almost tripped over a small, huddled figure.

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It was a tiny gray-haired woman, crouching there with a dirty thermal blanket wrapped around her. She shivered repeatedly. Sick and hiding from the foreman. I squatted beside her.

The woman started and her eyes got big with terror. She scrambled backwards toward the steps, almost falling over. I grabbed her arm and steadied her; her flesh felt as if it was burning up. "Don't be scared," I said.

Her eyes moved from me to Shar. Little cornered bunny-rabbit eyes, red and full of the awful knowledge that there's noplace left to hide. She babbled something in a tongue that I couldn't understand. I put my arms around her and patted her back—universal language. After a bit she stopped trying to pull away.

I whispered, "Do you know Mae Jones?"

She drew back and blinked.

"Mae Jones?" I repeated.

Slowly she nodded and pointed to the door off the next landing.

So Tommy's mother *was* here. If we could get her out, we'd have an English-speaking witness who, because she had her permanent green card, wouldn't be afraid to go to the authorities and file charges against the owners of this place. But there was no telling who or what was beyond that door. I glanced at Shar. She shook her head.

The sick woman was watching me. I thought back to yesterday morning and the way Darrin Boydston had communicated with the boy he called Daniel. It was worth a try.

I pointed to the woman. Pointed to the door. "Mae Jones." I pointed to the door again, then pointed to the floor.

The woman was straining to understand. I went through the routine twice more. She nodded and struggled to her feet. Trailing the ratty blanket behind her, she climbed the stairs and went through the door.

Shar and I released sighs at the same time. Then we sat down on the steps and waited.

It wasn't five minutes before the door opened. We both ducked down, just in case. An overly thin woman of about thirty-five rushed through so quickly that she stumbled on the top step and caught herself on the railing. She would have been beautiful, but lines of worry and pain cut deep into her face; her hair had been lopped off short and stood up in dirty spikes. Her eyes were

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jumpy, alternately glancing at us and behind her. She hurried down the stairs.

"You want me?"

"If you're Mae Jones." Already I was guiding her down the steps.

"I am. Who are—"

"We're going to get you out of here, take you to Tommy."

"Tommy! Is he—"

"He's all right, yes."

Her face brightened, but then was taken over by fear. "We must hurry. Lan faked a faint, but they will notice I'm gone very soon."

We rushed down the stairs, along the hall toward the storage room. We were at its door when a man called out behind us. He was coming from the sewing room at the far end.

Mae froze. I shoved her, and then we were weaving through the stacked cartons. Shar got down on her knees, helped Mae into the duct, and dove in behind her. The door banged open.

The man was yelling in a strange language. I slid into the duct, pulling myself along on its riveted sides. Hands grabbed for my ankles and got the left one. I kicked out with my right foot. He grabbed for it and missed. I kicked upward, hard, and heard a satisfying yelp of pain. His hand let go of my ankle and I wriggled forward and fell to the ground outside. Shar and Mae were already running for the fence.

But where the hell was Willie?

Then I saw him: a shadowy figure, motioning with both arms as if he were guiding an airplane up to the jetway. There was an enormous hole in the chain-link fence. Shar and Mae ducked through it.

I started running. Lights went on on the corners of the building. Men came outside, shouting. I heard a whine, then a crack.

Rifle, firing at us!

Willie and I hurled ourselves to the ground. We moved on elbows and knees through the hole in the fence and across the sidewalk to the shelter of a van parked there. Shar and Mae huddled behind it. Willie and I collapsed beside them just as sirens began to go off.

"Like 'Nam, all over again," he said.

I stared at him in astonishment. Willie had spent most of the war hanging out in a bar in Cam Ranh Bay.

Shar said, "Thank God you cut the hole in the fence!"

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Modestly he replied, "Yeah, well, you gotta do something when you're bored out of your skull."

Because a shot had been fired, the SFPD had probable cause to search the building. Inside they found some sixty Asian women—most of them illegals—who had been imprisoned there, some as long as five years, as well as evidence of other sweatshops the owners were running, both here and in southern California. The INS was called in, statements were taken, and finally at around five that morning Mae Jones was permitted to go with us to be reunited with her son.

Darrin Boydston greeted us at the Cash Cow, wearing electric-blue pants and a western-style shirt with the bucking-bull emblem embroidered over its pockets. A polyester cowboy. He stood watching as Tommy and Mae hugged and kissed, wiped a sentimental tear from his eye, and offered Mae a job. She accepted, and then he drove them to the house of a friend who would put them up until they found a place of their own. I waited around the pawnshop till he returned.

When Boydston came through the door he looked down in the mouth. He pulled up a stool next to the one I sat on and said,

"Sure am gonna miss that boy."

"Well, you'll probably be seeing a lot of him, with Mae working here."

"Yeah." He brightened some. "And I'm gonna help her get him into classes, stuff like that. After she lost her Navy benefits when that skunk of a husband walked out on her, she didn't know about all the other stuff that's available." He paused, then added, "So what's the damage?"

"You mean, what do you owe us? We'll bill you."

"Better be an honest accounting, little lady," he said. "Ma'am, I mean," he added in his twangiest Texas accent. And smiled.

I smiled, too. ●

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EN FAMILLE

by Ed Gorman

In last month's Jury Box, Jon L. Breen described the following story by Ed Gorman as "haunting and unforgettable (a term I don't use lightly)." Mr. Breen encountered the story in a collection of Gorman stories entitled *Moonchasers* (Forge), to be released at about the same time this issue goes to subscribers. †

By the time I was eight years old, I'd fallen disconsolately in love with any number of little girls who had absolutely no interest in me. These were little girls I'd met in all the usual places: school, playground, neighborhood.

Only the girl I met at the racetrack took any interest in me. Her name was Wendy and, like me, she was brought to the track three or four times a week by her father, after school in the autumn months, during working hours in the summer.

Ours was one of those impossibly romantic relationships that only a young boy can have (all those nights of kissing pillows, pretending it was her, while my mind played one of those swelling romantic songs you hear in movies with Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant: How vulnerable and true and beautiful she always was in my mind's perfect eye). I first saw her the spring of my ninth year, and not until I was fifteen did we even say hello to each other, even though we saw each other at least three times a week. But she was always with me, this girl I thought about constantly, and dreamed of nightly, the melancholy little blonde with the slow sad blue eyes and the quick sad smile.

I knew all about the sadness I saw in her. It was my sadness, too. Our fathers brought us to the track in order to make their gambling more palatable to our mothers. How much of a vice could it be if you took the little one along? The money lost at the track meant rent going unpaid, grocery-store credit cut off, the tele-

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phone frequently disconnected. It also meant arguing. No matter how deeply I hid in the closet, no matter how many pillows I put over my head, I could still hear them shrieking at each other. Sometimes he hit her. Once he even pushed her down the stairs and she broke her leg. Despite all this, I wanted them to stay together. I was terrified they would split up. I loved them both beyond imagining. Don't ask me why I loved him so much. I have no idea.

The day we first spoke, the little girl and I, that warm May afternoon in my fifteenth year, a black eye spoiled her very pretty, very pale little face. So he'd finally gotten around to hitting her. My father had gotten around to hitting me years ago. They got so frustrated over their gambling, their inability to *stop* their gambling, that they grabbed the first person they found and visited all their despair on him.

She was coming up from the seats in the bottom tier where she and her father always sat. I saw her and stepped out into the aisle.

"Hi," I said after more than six years of us watching each other from afar.

"Hi."

"I'm sorry about your eye."

"He was pretty drunk. He doesn't usually get violent. But it seems to be getting worse lately." She looked back at their seats. Her father was glaring at us. "I'd better hurry. He wants me to get him a hot dog."

"I'd like to see you sometime."

She smiled, sad and sweet with her black eye. "Yeah, me too."

I saw her the rest of the summer but we never again got the chance to speak. Nor did we make the opportunity. She was my narcotic. I thought of no one else, wanted no one else. The girls at school had no idea what my home life was like, how old and worn my father's gambling had made my mother, how anxious and angry it had made me. Only Wendy understood.

Wendy Wendy Wendy. By now, my needs having evolved, she was no longer just the pure dream of a forlorn boy. I wanted her carnally, too. She'd become a beautiful young woman.

Near the end of that summer an unseasonable rainy grayness filled the skies. People at the track took to wearing winter coats. A few races had to be called off. Wendy and her father suddenly vanished.

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I looked for them every day, and every night trudged home feeling betrayed and bereft. "Can't find your little girlfriend?" my father said. He thought it was funny.

Then one night, while I was in my bedroom reading a science fiction magazine, he shouted: "Hey! Get out here! Your girlfriend's on TV!"

And so she was.

"Police announce an arrest in the murder of Myles Larkin, who was found stabbed to death in his car last night. They have taken Larkin's only child, sixteen-year-old Wendy, into custody and formally charged her with the murder of her father."

I went twice to see her but they wouldn't let me in. Finally, I learned the name of her lawyer, lied that I was a shirt-tail cousin, and he took me up to the cold concrete visitors' room on the top floor of the city jail.

Even in the drab uniform the prisoners wore, she looked lovely in her bruised and wan way.

"Did he start beating you up again?" I asked.

"No."

"Did he start beating up your mother?"

"No."

"Did he lose his job or get you evicted?"

She shook her head. "No. It was just that I couldn't take it anymore. I mean, he wasn't losing any more or any less money at the track, it was just I—I snapped. I don't know how else to explain it. It was like I saw what he'd done to our lives and I—I snapped. That's all—I just snapped."

She served seven years in a minimum-security women's prison upstate, during which time my parents were killed in an automobile accident, I finished college, got married, had a child, and took up the glamorous and adventurous life of a tax consultant. My wife Donna knew about my mental and spiritual ups and downs. Her father had been an abusive alcoholic.

I didn't see Wendy until twelve years later, when I was sitting at the track with my seven-year-old son. He didn't always like going to the track with me—my wife didn't like me going to the track at all—so I'd had to fortify him with the usual comic books, candy, and a pair of "genuine" Dodgers sunglasses.

Between races, I happened to look down at the seats Wendy and her father usually took, and there she was. Something about the cock of her head told me it was her.

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"Can we go, Dad?" my son Rob said. "It's so boring here."

Boring? I'd once tried to explain to his mother how good I felt when I was at the track. I was not the miserable, frightened, self-effacing owner of Advent Tax Systems (some system—me and my low-power Radio Shack computer and software). No. . . . When I was at the track I felt strong and purposeful and optimistic, and frightened of nothing at all. I was pure potential—potential for winning the easy cash that was the mark of men who were successful with women, and with their competitors, and with their own swaggering dreams.

"Please, Dad. It's really boring here. Honest."

But all I could see, all I could think about, was Wendy. I hadn't seen her since my one visit to the jail. Then I noticed that she, too, had a child with her, a very proper-looking little blonde girl whose head was cocked at the odd and fetching angle so favored by her mother.

We saw each other a dozen more times before we spoke.

Then: "I knew I'd see you again someday."

Wan smile. "All those years I was in prison, I wasn't so sure." Her daughter came up to her then and Wendy said: "This is Margaret."

"Hello, Margaret. Glad to meet you. This is my son Rob."

With the great indifference only children can summon, they nodded hellos.

"We just moved back to the city," Wendy explained. "I thought I'd show Margaret where I used to come with my father." She mentioned her father so casually, one would never have guessed that she'd murdered the man.

Ten more times we saw each other, children in tow, before our affair began.

April sixth of that year was the first time we ever made love, this in a motel where the sunset was the color of blood in the window, and a woman two rooms away wept inconsolably. I had the brief fantasy that it was my wife in that room.

"Do you know how long I've loved you?" she said.

"Oh, God, you don't know how good it is to hear that."

"Since I was eight years old."

"For me, since I was nine."

"This would destroy my husband if he ever found out."

"The same with my wife."

"But I have to be honest."

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"I want you to be honest."

"I don't care what it does to him. I just want to be with you."

In December of that year, my wife Donna discovered a lump in her right breast. Two weeks later she received a double mastectomy and began chemotherapy.

She lived nine years, and my affair with Wendy extended over the entire time. Early on, both our spouses knew about our relationship. Her husband, an older and primmer man than I might have expected, stopped by my office one day in his new BMW and threatened to destroy my business. He claimed to have great influence in the financial community.

My wife threatened to leave me, but she was too weak. She had one of those cancers that did not kill her but that never left her alone, either. She was weak most of the time, staying for days in the bedroom that had become hers, as the guest room had become mine. Whenever she became particularly angry about Wendy, Rob would fling himself at me, screaming how much he hated me, pounding me with fists that became more powerful with each passing year. He hated me for many of the same reasons I'd hated my own father, my ineluctable passion for the track, and the way there was never any security in our lives, the family bank account wholly subject to the whims of the horses that ran that day.

Wendy's daughter likewise blamed her mother for the alcoholism that had stricken the husband. There was constant talk of divorce, but their finances were such that neither of them could quite afford it. Margaret constantly called Wendy a whore, and after a while Wendy realized that Margaret sincerely meant it.

Two things happened the next year. My wife was finally dragged off into the darkness, and Wendy's husband crashed his car into a retaining wall and was killed.

Even on the days of the respective funerals, we went to the track.

"He never understood."

"Neither did she," I said.

"I mean why I come here."

"I know."

"I mean how it makes me feel alive."

"I know."

"I mean how nothing else matters."

"I know."

"I should've been nicer to him, I suppose."

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"I suppose. But we can't make a life out of blaming ourselves. What's happened, happened. We have to go on from here."

"Do you think Rob hates you as much as Margaret hates me?"

"More, probably," I said. "The way he looks at me sometimes, I think he'll probably kill me someday."

But it wasn't me who was to die.

All during Wendy's funeral, I kept thinking of those words. Margaret had murdered her mother just as Wendy had killed her father. The press made a lot of this.

All the grief I should have visited upon my dead wife I visited upon my dead lover. I went through months of alcoholic stupor. Clients fell away; rent forced me to move from our nice suburban home to a small apartment in a section of the city that always seemed to be on fire. I didn't have to worry about Rob anymore. He got enough loans for college and wanted nothing to do with me.

Years and more years, the track the only constant in my life. Many times I tried to contact Rob through the alumni office of his school but it was no use. He'd left word not to give his current address to his father.

There was the hospital, and, several times, the detox clinic. There was the church in which I asked for forgiveness, and the born-again rally at which I proclaimed my happiness in the Lord.

And then there was the shelter. Five years I lived there, keeping the place painted and clean for the other residents. The nuns seemed to like me.

My teeth went entirely, and I had to have dentures. The arthritis in my foot got so bad that I could not wear shoes for days at a time. And my eyesight, beyond even the magic of glasses, got so bad that when I watched the horse races on TV, I couldn't tell which horse was which.

Then one night I got sick and threw up blood and in the morning one of the sisters took me to the hospital where they kept me overnight. In the morning the doctor came in and told me that I had stomach cancer. He gave me five months to live.

There were days when I was happy about my death sentence. Looking back, my life seemed so long and sad, I was glad to have it over with. Then there were days when I sobbed about it, and hated the God the nuns told me to pray to. I wanted to live to go back to the track again and have a sweet, beautiful winner.

Four months after the doctor's diagnosis, the nuns put me in bed and I knew I'd never walk on my own again. I thought of

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Donna, and her death, and how I'd made it all the worse with the track and Wendy.

The weaker I got, the more I thought about Rob. I talked about him to the nuns. And then one day he was there.

He wasn't alone, either. With him was a very pretty dark-haired woman and a seven-year old boy who got the best features of both his mother and father.

"Dad, this is Mae and Stephen."

"Hello, Mae and Stephen. I'm very glad to meet you. I wish I was better company."

"Don't worry about that," Mae said. "We're just happy to meet you."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Stephen said.

"Why don't I take him, and give you a few minutes alone with your Dad?" Mae said.

And so, after all these years, we were alone and he said, "I still can't forgive you, Dad."

"I don't blame you."

"I want to. But somehow I can't."

I took his hand. "I'm just glad you turned out so well, son. Like your mother and not your father."

"I loved her very much."

"I know you did."

"And you treated her very, very badly."

All his anger. All these years.

"That's a beautiful wife and son you've got."

"They're my whole life, everything that matters to me."

I started crying; I couldn't help it. Here at the end I was glad to know he'd done well for himself and his family.

"I love you, Rob."

"I love you, too, Dad."

And then he leaned down and kissed me on the cheek and I started crying harder and embarrassed both of us.

Mae and Stephen came back.

"My turn," Rob said. He patted me on the shoulder. "I'll be back soon."

I think he wanted to go somewhere alone to cry.

"So," Mae said, "are you comfortable?"

"Oh, very."

"This seems like a nice place."

"It is."

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"And the nuns seem very nice, too."

"Very nice." I smiled. "I'm just so glad I got to see you two."

"Same here. I've wanted to meet you for years."

"Well," I said, smiling. "I'm glad the time finally came."

Stephen, proper in his white shirt and blue trousers and neatly combed dark hair, said, "I just wish you could go to the track with us sometime, Grandpa."

She didn't have to say anything. I saw it all in the quick certain pain that appeared in her lovely gray eyes.

"The racetrack, you mean?" I said.

"Uh-huh. Dad takes me all the time, doesn't he, Mom?"

"Oh, yes," she said, her voice toneless. "All the time."

She started to say more but then the door opened up and Rob came in and there was no time to talk.

There was no time at all. ●

"And don't keep asking me for the time,
I'll let you know when it's 2022!"

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

EAST OF A

by Russell Atwood

Finding a teenage runaway in New York City is easy. The hard part is finding the one you're looking for.

I was in my office/apartment at the computer, hooked up to the Department of Justice's database, downloading a file on evidence seizure for a lawyer friend, when call-waiting interrupted the transfer. My modem crackling, I switched the phone cord and picked up the receiver.

They were calling from a pay phone at Veselka's deli three blocks down. Walter and Louise Strich had come to the city to find their daughter Melissa. After a day of looking on their own, they wanted me to find her.

Mystery's most famous editor/writer, Ellery Queen, employed two managing editors who also contributed fiction to *EQMM*: Clayton Rawson and Eleanor Sullivan. This month we debut another former *EQMM* managing editor, Russell Atwood. Mr. Atwood left his job at *EQMM* in 1991 to pursue his own writing. The results of his efforts shine in this memorable first story. By day, the author works for *A&E Monthly*.

I asked them to pick me up a coffee—dark, three sugars—and come right over. My place was a mess but there was enough time to empty the ashtrays, fold the couch bed, and gather all the dirty glasses into the sink. I met them at the top of the stairs.

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Mr. Strich said, "Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Mr. Sherwood."

"Thank you for the coffee." He waved away the dollar I offered. "Please come in."

It took them awhile to get it all out, but my guest chairs are comfortable and I was patient. Their story was a familiar one:

Melissa Strich, fifteen, had left her home in Keene, New Hampshire five months before, in mid-April, telling a friend she was going to Manhattan to be with her boyfriend, Gary Stadnicki, a would-be guitar player. The New Hampshire police's efforts to locate either Melissa or Stadnicki had turned up nothing; Stadnicki's last known address had been a squatter's building on East 13th Street that the NYPD had evacuated for demolition the previous week.

For five months the Strichs didn't hear from their daughter. Then, two days ago, Tuesday, she called asking for enough money to get her home. So happy to hear her voice, they didn't pressure her for details, just wired the hundred dollars where she told them to, a Western Union on Avenue A, the Lower East Side. The next day, when there was no word from her, the Strichs checked with Western Union and discovered the money hadn't been claimed. Not knowing what else to do, frantic after so many months of worrying, they left their home before dawn the next morning and drove the six hours to New York. By 10 A.M. they were parked in front of the Western Union on Avenue A. They watched all day, but no one ever came for the money.

I asked Mr. Strich what kind of car they drove.

Mrs. Strich answered. "You can see it from your window, Mr. Sherwood. The stationwagon on the corner."

I craned back and, through the wide oval window overlooking 12th Street and 2nd Avenue, saw a pale blue stationwagon parked across the street. It had New Hampshire license plates and, sitting on its hood, a rangy hooker—probably little older than the Strichs' daughter—applying badly needed flesh tone to her face.

"Your daughter could've picked your car out from five blocks away," I said. "You may have scared her off."

"Our daughter's not scared of us," Mr. Strich said, almost a challenge.

"But we didn't know what else to do," Louise Strich said. "I got so desperate I started stopping people on the street, showing them Missy's picture, asking if they'd seen her."

She handed me the photograph, a head and shoulders shot of

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Melissa taken the year before: round hazel eyes, cornsilk hair fluffed back, feather earrings brushing her long, slender neck. She was hugging a golden retriever. If she'd been roughing it on the street for five months, I wondered if even her own mother would recognize her now.

"Some people wouldn't even stop," Louise Strich said. "But . . . then there were these children sitting by—"

"Children!?" her husband groaned. "One was shaved bald. A tattoo of a *bat* on his forehead. I couldn't believe she went over to 'em."

Mrs. Strich set the record straight. "They were very polite. I showed them Missy's picture, but they said they didn't know her."

I shrugged. "They probably wouldn't have told you if they did. These kids are down here living on the streets for a lot of different reasons; some are just slumming rich kids, playing homeless. Others are fugitives from their families, running from abusers, hiding out."

"But listen, Mr. Sherwood, when we got back to the car, the one with the bat on his head came over. He said he *did* know Missy *and* where she was."

"He knew your daughter?"

"He knew she was from New Hampshire."

"He could've gotten that from your license plates."

She looked unsure.

"But he said he could go and get her for us, if only . . ."

Her voice trailed off.

I could see what was coming next. "How much did you give him?"

Mr. Strich answered, disgusted. "Fifty dollars!"

"But he needed it," his wife insisted. "He owed money to the person she was staying with and he—"

"We waited over two hours," Mr. Strich said. "Then we called you."

I nodded.

"Is there anyone at your house in case your daughter calls?"

"My sister's there," Walter Strich said.

"How long do you plan to stay in the city?"

"We don't have any plan, really." He was a little ashamed. "Do you think . . . how long usually do . . . ?"

I told them I'd have a better idea how things stood in the morning, suggested they check into a hotel for the night, and gave them the address of the Lincoln Towers Hotel on 34th Street; it had an underground garage.

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At the door, we shook hands. Their skin was cold and frail to my touch. In their watery, sleepless eyes I saw a desperation that embarrassed me. Against my better judgment I told them there was nothing to worry about, their daughter was fine.

I'd looked for a lot of runaways since I took up the trade, first as an apprentice at Metro Investigations and for the last three years working freelance. The usual route was to canvas the youth hostels, shelters, and halfway houses, looking for Missy or anyone who may have seen her, but it was too late to start that process now, a little after eight P.M.

It bothered me that Melissa never picked up the money. A hundred dollars pulled a lot of weight on the street. Something obviously prevented her from getting it; I just didn't know what. Rather than rely on my psychic powers, I put my mouth to work for an hour calling the area hospitals and asking if Melissa Strich or a Jane Doe fitting her description had been admitted in the last two days. Everywhere I called Louise Strich had preceded me. I guess calling hospitals is a parent's first reflex.

I indulged a reflex of my own and called my "in" at the 9th Precinct on the Lower East Side.

Billie Mallow had only been on the force three years, but she'd already perfected her professional tone of bored hostility. Of course, that all changed when she heard me: the hostility was no longer bored.

"What do you want?"

"Fine, thanks, and yourself, Billie?"

"Look, I'm busy here, Payton."

We used to date. It was more than five years ago, when we were both enrolled at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and only lasted four months, but I never lost the urge to hear her voice. As for Billie, I don't think she'll ever forgive herself for going out with me in the first place.

I quickly gave her Melissa Strich's description and asked if anyone matching it had been collared over the last couple of days. At least it would've explained why Missy hadn't claimed the cash.

Billie laughed gruffly. "Is that what you think I *do?* Stand by the door, stamping their hands as they pass through? Goodbye, Payton."

Click.

Still, it'd been nice to hear her voice.

A minute later, the phone rang and it was Billie.

"Hey, Payton, you said Tuesday, right?"

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"Yeah."

"Uh-huh. Your runaway got a name?"

"Sure. Why, what you got?"

"Maybe nothing. What's her name?"

There was an official edge to her voice that made me sit up and squeak my swivel chair.

"That depends who's asking, Bill."

"How about a couple of first grades who'd love to spend the whole evening asking? They're looking for a kid like yours, snatched a purse outside the Outsiders Cafe Tuesday noon."

"Things must be slow, detectives working on a purse-snatching."

"They're homicide. The purse belonged to Charles Marburger's niece."

The name was fresh in my memory. I thanked Billie for the information, but hung up on her angry demands for the girl's name. I dug yesterday morning's *Post* out of the garbage, shook out the cigarette butts, and read the headline: GRAMERCY PARK SLAYING.

> A 72-year-old autograph expert was found fatally stabbed in his Gramercy Park townhouse Tuesday afternoon by police responding to a 911 call. Mr. Charles Marburger was pronounced dead on arrival at Bellevue Hospital, from numerous wounds to the chest and throat. Detectives are investigating robbery as a motive.
>
> The assailant or assailants may have gained entrance with keys obtained earlier that day when a purse belonging to the victim's niece, Celia Janssen, was stolen outside an East Village cafe. Police are seeking a young female suspect in connection with both crimes. . . .

I read another account in the *Times* that provided a lengthy obit for Marburger, highlighting his career as an autograph expert (his crowning achievement the denouncement of a diary purported to be Hitler's). I dropped the papers back in the trash.

I had to hand it to myself. I was really giving the Strichs their money's worth, an hour on the job and already trying to tie their daughter in with a homicide. Brooding over it did no good. I got out the white pages and looked up Celia Janssen, but she wasn't listed. I did find a Charles Marburger on East 20th Street though. I dialed the number, closed my eyes, and let it ring.

Long after I'd lost count, a woman's voice answered, standoffish at first, until I assured her I wasn't "yet another reporter" (not that being a private investigator endeared me to her).

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"I'm calling about the purse-snatching."

I could hear her breathe. I wondered what she looked like.

"Well, what about it?"

I hate interviewing witnesses over the phone. Half of what you can learn from somebody is lost on their unseen gestures and facial expressions. I told Ms. Janssen I had to see her in person, offering to meet at her convenience the next day.

"If it's that important," she said, "I could see you now."

I glanced at my watch. Nine o'clock. I said that would be fine.

The neighborhood of Gramercy Park appears like the last holdout to a forgotten age of gentility in Manhattan, the elegant era of Edith Wharton. At its center is the park, completely enclosed by a wrought-iron fence, its locked gates protecting the green grass, gravel lanes, and flower gardens from the outside world. Its small forest towered above the surrounding buildings, two- and three-story townhouses dating back to the 1800s in Italianate, Greek revival, and Victorian Gothic styles. It must've been a quaint place to live until Marburger's murder.

Curved white marble steps led up to the entrance of the dead man's townhouse, a gaslit globe flickered over its doorway. There were separate buzzers for Marburger and Ms. Janssen. I touched hers once and the door opened to a black-haired young woman with long, coltish limbs and a boyish physique. She had on a dark blouse and a white satin skirt that clung to her like a layer of thick cream.

She looked at me with a kind of happy relief. I don't know what she thought she saw in my eyes, but her dazzling smile was easy to take.

"Mr. Sherwood?"

I handed her my identification. As she read, I looked over her shoulder into a hallway of cozy Victorian decor. To the right a spiral staircase led to the upper floors, the walls decorated with autographed photos of celebrities and statesmen. Over her other shoulder, I saw down the facing passage to a closed oak door wrapped up like an unwanted present in yellow ribbon: CRIME SCENE—DO NOT ENTER.

Grabbing a black knee-length coat and a Chanel shoulder bag, Ms. Janssen stepped out and closed the door behind her.

"I'd rather not talk here, Mr. Sherwood. We can go to the park."

The gates to the park are locked twenty-four hours a day, keys belonging solely to the residents of the square. When I first moved to the city, I'd occasionally climb the fence late at night, usually

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drunk. I'd grip the spearhead tips of the fence and hoist myself up, over, and down into soft black earth on the other side. In an instant the stink of exhaust would be replaced by the aroma of dirt, dewy grass, and cedar chips. Back then it felt like breaking into the Garden of Eden.

Celia Janssen had a key.

We went in the east entrance. When I started toward a statue I remembered, a surreal copper sculpture of a two-faced sun/moon, she tugged my sleeve and led me along another path, into shadows.

"I had to get out of there," she said. "The phone kept ringing. I finally took it off the hook after you called."

"I'm lucky I got in under the wire. I'm sorry I have to disturb you at all."

"Are you? People only say that when they want something. What do you want, Mr. Sherwood?"

"I'm trying to locate a young girl. A runaway. I think you might've seen her the other day."

She stopped in a patch of light. Eyeing me, she fished in her shoulder bag for a thin brown cigarette, lit it, and let the smoke drip from her wide, dark lips.

"You mean the girl who stole my purse?"

"Well, that's what I'm trying to determine." I handed her the photo of Melissa Strich.

She angled to catch more light from a streetlamp, studied the photo, then handed it back without a change of expression.

"Could have been her. If so, she's changed a great deal."

"In what way?"

"Dirtier. Much dirtier. There's a green tint to her hair now, sort of chartreuse, and braided into dreadlocks. It's hard to tell from the photo. Also she had a silver stud through her nose and silver rings that looked like barbed wire pierced through her lower lip."

"How tall?"

"I was seated at the time. Maybe five-three."

"Color of her eyes?"

"I didn't really get a good look. A glimpse as she turned away. Then my eyes were drawn to her nose and mouth. I didn't even know my purse was gone until she was halfway down the block."

"How much she get?"

"A couple hundred dollars and my credit cards."

"Cancel them?"

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"Naturally." She blew out smoke. "What makes you think it's the same girl?"

"Timing."

Whatever she made of that, she didn't say. We walked to the center of the park to a white flagpole with a bleached-out stars and stripes clinging to the top as if it were afraid to fall. The sky was soft black velvet. Starless to the city. A breeze shook the leafy heads of the high trees with an innocuous sound like waves stroking a pebbled shore.

She said, "I can't believe any of this is happening. It's like living a nightmare."

I asked if she knew what leads the police were working on.

"They're looking for this girl too, but she couldn't have killed Charles. I mean, he wasn't strong, but . . . She looked so starved."

"According to the papers, your uncle was a leading expert in his field. Was he working on anything special?"

Her face was shadowed, but a glint of teeth appeared. "The police asked me not to say anything but yes, he was. A lost fragment by Keats, in Keats's own hand, an abandoned poem entitled 'Cupid.' It was taken in the robbery."

"Not the kind of thing your average thief would grab. How'd your uncle come by it?"

"He never said. The police are questioning collectors he dealt with regularly." We rounded the statue of Edwin Booth. She asked, "How will you look for this girl?"

"Trade secret," I said. I had no idea.

"Maybe I could help. I've seen her. And maybe as a woman . . ."

I spent a moment pleasantly filling in that blank. The offer was tempting for more than one reason.

"I don't think so," I said. "I'd feel responsible for you."

"That's sweet."

We walked along the remainder of the path in silence to the gate at Irving Place. As we reached it, she turned toward me and looked into my eyes.

I leaned in and our lips formed a perfect seal, her mouth moist and sweet. We parted an inch and rested forehead to forehead, breathing each other's hot breath.

"Thanks," she said softly.

"For what?"

She shook her head and turned away from me, out of my arms.

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I watched her for a moment against the backdrop of million-dollar homes. She looked very alone. It was time for me to go.

I handed her one of my cards. "In case the police call about the girl," I said, but it wasn't what I was thinking.

It was just after 10 P.M., a busy time, shows getting out, dinners ending, people rushing to get home. I had to wait five minutes for a vacant cab on Third, and then they came three in a row. I rode straight down to the Village.

By the light of passing neon signs, I looked over Missy's picture again. I couldn't see her involved in any of this. I tried picturing her with green hair and a pierced lip, but it wouldn't take. It gave me an idea though. I told the driver to drop me at St. Mark's Place.

For the three blocks between Third Avenue and Avenue A, 8th Street in the Village becomes St. Mark's Place, a major passage through this historic neighborhood. Its string of T-shirt stands, CD stores, and bars attracted the college crowd from NYU and tourists from around the world, who in turn attracted the homeless and the criminal to peddle sob stories or drugs. It was a sultry night for early September and people on all sides were taking advantage of it.

I stepped from the cab into a fog of sandalwood incense snaking from a cardtable set up on the corner. A pack of kids in baggy clothes ground by on skateboards and jumped the curb, almost hitting a man wearing a black wig, high heels, and a flower-print dress crossing the street. He/she shook his parasol at them. Two severe-looking women with close-cropped black hair, walking hand-in-hand, noticed the man, glanced at each other, and broke into giggles like schoolchildren.

Rounding the corner, I saw a young guy sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. He was dressed in grimy fatigues and a torn green T-shirt that said "The Dukes of Biohazard" in cracked white letters. As I got closer, he sang out, "Hey, buddy, spare change for beer and drugs?"

I had to laugh. I looked down at him. His flesh was pale, almost translucent. A front tooth was missing from his grin and there was a brass ring pierced through his nose like a bull.

I placed the change from my cab ride in his waxy hand and offered him a cigarette.

"Awesome, man."

I gave him three.

"Nice ring," I said. "You get it done at that shop around here?"

"Naw, did this one myself. Ugly, huh?"

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"Oh, very." I admired it. "But there *is* a body-piercing place around here, right?"

"Sure. My man Lyle's place over there," he jerked his head, not taking his eyes off me. "If you're thinking about getting plugged, it's the place to go. Tell Lyle 'Poker' sent you."

"Poker. Right."

It was a second-floor walk-up over a used-CD store, past a bar spilling over-amped heavy metal and the yeasty stench of stale beer. The front sidewalk was crowded with young people passing a paper bag, smoking, laughing, singing. Sometimes you get lucky: I looked them over carefully and they met my scrutiny with stonefaced tolerance. None of them was Missy.

Posted on the shop's door was an anatomy chart pinpointing the thirty-odd places (some odder than others) where a human being could conceivably be pierced. One, called a "Prince Albert," hurt me deeply just to look at. Inside, a dull buzzer announced my entrance.

"We're closed," a gravelly voice bellowed from behind a red velvet curtain at the rear.

Along one wall of the store was a glass display case filled with an array of exotic body jewelry: studs, rings, ear clamps, miniature chains, and collars. What caught my attention, though, was the wall by the cash register, covered from baseboard to tin-paneled ceiling with hundreds of Polaroid snapshots. A visual record of satisfied clients.

I gravitated toward them, but the velvet curtain parted and the gravelly voice stopped me.

"Yeah, whadaya want?"

He was fireplug stocky with a hard Buddha belly. His head was bald but not entirely hairless, a black Kentucky-colonel beard sprouting from his chin. He tugged at it, assessing me with his leaden eyes.

I told him Poker sent me.

"Poker? What's a poker?" He crossed his arms, his manner as pedantic as a professor emeritus.

I tried another tack. "My editor at the *Voice*. He said he'd call ahead."

"The Village Voice?"

"Yeah, I'm putting the finishing touches on this article that was started by this other guy who o.d.-ed last week and now's in rehab till October, and we're going to press in two days."

"Article on what?"

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"A season round-up on the newest innovations in your craft. You know, design, equipment, method."

The leaden eyes melted a little.

"That's a great idea," he said. "You know, you came to the right place. I've trained with some of the masters like—"

From behind the velvet curtain a man's voice screeched, "Lyle, I'm bleeding here. What the hell are you doin'?"

"Oh, shut it!" Lyle yelled over his shoulder, then said to me, "Look, I've gotta finish up with this dork. Can you hang?"

"Sure, no problem. I'll just check out some of your work." I motioned to the wall of photos.

He grinned, slapped my back, and went back behind the curtain.

Studying the snapshots was like screening applicants for the Coney Island freak show. There were men and women, young and old, some with rows of tight rings threading their eyebrows or studded balls cleaved straight through the center of their tongues. Some photos were only body shots of elaborately impaled nipples and bellybuttons. I almost missed what I'd been scanning for—a tight row of barbed-wire rings on a girl's bottom lip—but there it was low to the floor.

The flash camera had been too close to the subject, bleaching out her face, her eyes glowing orange, but she fit Celia Janssen's description of the girl who had taken her purse. I tried to match the face with my photo of Missy, but the Polaroid's quality was too poor for comparison. I could make out what she was wearing though: a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket with green-flaming skulls painted down the sides.

I pried loose the staples and walked out of the shop with the Polaroid cupped in my hand.

Once on the sidewalk I lost myself in the slow parade of people, hoping my quick departure didn't make Lyle suspicious.

Turning the corner onto Second Ave I ran into an impromptu flea market being broken up by the cops, two officers ordering the people to pack up the clothes, jewelry, appliances, and books they'd laid out on the sidewalk for sale. I crossed the street and stopped for a Coke and a greasy slice of pizza. I chewed and considered my options.

I had a picture of the girl—or at least someone I thought was the girl. Celia Janssen could've told me if it was the same one, but it was too late to call her—even if she had put her phone back on the hook. I'd done a lot for one evening, I could've called it quits (maybe

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should've), but I felt like I was on a roll. And there was still one other place I could check: the scene of the crime, the first crime. The Outsiders Cafe.

It wasn't far away. I followed St. Mark's east, past First Avenue toward Avenue A. While I was waiting for a light to change, a man with ashen-black skin came up to me, made eye contact, and asked, "Sense, man? You want some good sense?"

He was trying to peddle weed, but sense—common sense—was really what I needed. I was fresh out, otherwise I would've looked behind me, just once, and noticed that there was someone dogging my trail.

A row of gleaming Harleys were parked in front of the Outsiders Cafe on the corner of East 6th Street. The tables out front, surrounded by a low white fence, were all occupied. A line of people waited anxiously for one to open up. I went inside where it was less crowded.

The harried woman making Margaritas behind the bar pointed me to the manager, a young black man dressed in blue jeans and a green silk shirt open at the collar. He was ordering a busboy to clear a table for four as I came up to him. I asked if he knew anything about the purse-snatching on Tuesday, maybe the names of any waiters who'd witnessed it.

"It happened on my shift," he lamented. "Stuff like that always happenin' on my shift. You know, I once had a guy die of a brain aneurysm just as I came on."

"Tough."

"Not that it was his fault, but . . . well, take this lady. Just stupid. Comes down here, looking fine, flashing presidents. You'd think she had something on the ball, you know. But she goes and puts her bag down by her chair, right near the fence. Asking for trouble, you know? And I told her so, but she just shrugs, like, 'Big deal.'"

"See it happen?"

"I saw. Just didn't believe it right away the way she just *sat* there watching this kid take off. Where I grew up, if somebody stole from you, you let the whole world know."

"Was this the girl?"

I showed him the Polaroid snapshot. He took his time.

"Yeah, that's her. Same clothes and everything. You a cop?"

I shook my head, thanked him, and left somewhat distracted by an idea that was taking shape in my mind. I was trying to smooth

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its edges when I glanced to my left and saw Melissa Strich on the opposite corner of Avenue A.

I don't think I could have recognized her from either of the photos in my pocket if she hadn't still been wearing the leather jacket decorated with burning green skulls. Her dreadlocks had been chopped off and the remaining bristly hair dyed ink black.

She stepped off the curb and cut across to my side of the street, but walking away from me. I followed.

Passing a fruit stand outside a Korean deli, she casually grabbed two oranges and kept walking at an even stride. I didn't bat an eye until the owner came running out after her, then suddenly all three of us were running up the avenue. The deli owner gave up at the first corner, but Missy didn't slow her pace, and neither did I. She hopped the short gate closing off the path into Tompkins Square Park and fled into darkness.

I went in after her.

The tar path snaked smoothly past trees and junglegyms and dry fountains reeking of urine. Irregular shadows cast from the arching branches whipped around my head. I couldn't see her anywhere at first, but a soft breeze blew up, carrying the sweet fragrance of orange. I stood sniffing the air like a golden retriever. As my eyes adjusted, I made her out, slumped on a park bench a few yards ahead. I crept toward her as she chewed.

Softly, I said, "Missy?"

She sprang up and spat out orange, barking a swear, but standing her ground.

"Don't come near me."

"It's okay," I said. "I'm a friend. I was hired by your parents."

She laughed.

"Yeah, my parents would have to hire friends."

"They hired me to find you."

"*My* parents? You're nuts."

"They're here. They want to take you home."

"Yeah, right."

"It's true," I said. "But first, we have a few things to sort out. Tell me about the purse, what did you do with the keys?"

She stiffened, tensed for either fight or flight.

She said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, *I* don't care about the purse. I just need to know who you gave the keys to."

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She started to say something, then checked herself. In the dark I couldn't tell what was passing over her face.

"Wise up," I said, "if I found you, the cops will too. Maybe I can help."

She swore. "You're not 5-0, so what's it to you if I lifted that bitch's purse?"

"The *keys*, Missy?"

"What keys? There weren't any. Not even a wallet, just a wad of bills, no change, not even a stick of gum. No friggin' keys, mister!"

I was starting to get a bad feeling about things. A little too late as it turned out.

"Never mind," I said. "Come on."

She stiffened. "Come on where?"

"You've got to talk to the police."

"Like hell I do!"

She started to run, but I was close enough to grab one wrist. A feral noise in her throat, she clawed at my face with her free hand, her blunt, broken fingernails scented of orange. I knocked her arm away.

I'd just succeed in getting both her narrow wrists into one hand when a number 6 train hit me low from behind. I didn't remember falling, just my cheek skidding across the tar, sparking my attention. I was eye level with the earth, listening to Melissa's running feet receding.

I sat up, tried to stand, but my legs wobbled under me like collapsible poker chairs.

A voice behind me warned, "Don't get up."

"Don't worry," I said, but tried again anyway.

"I'm telling you, don't get up."

I turned. A sweat-soaked man in jogging shorts was standing over me, fists clenched, chest pumping. He started yelling for the cops. He had a powerful voice, but suddenly it was like a whisper, blotted out by another of much greater urgency.

The girl's scream ripped across the evening sounds of the city, paralyzing time. I thought it would never end. But when it finally did the void it left was a hundred times worse.

By the time we found her, she was already dead, lying near the handball courts in a gathering moat of her own blood. So much of it. A neck wound. The short-bladed knife still inserted in her throat, her chin propped up by its blunt handle.

I couldn't bear the sight of her eyes.

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Stepping closer I saw a piece of paper in her hand. An age-yellowed sheet inscribed with cramped, ornate writing, one word foremost on the page: "Cupid."

My torn pants and scraped face didn't discourage the responding officers from jumping to the wrong conclusion. They handcuffed me and left me in the backseat of their cruiser while they went off to direct the arrival of the EMS van and the crowd forming around the park's northeast entrance.

More police, uniformed and plainclothes, converged on the scene. Through the side window of the cruiser I watched two sour-faced detectives question the jogger who'd attacked me. It obviously helped my situation that he'd been standing over me at the moment the girl was killed, because when the detectives came over to talk, they removed my handcuffs.

Before I answered any questions, I asked them to call Billie Mallow at the 9th (the precinct was just a few blocks away). Not only would she be a good character reference, but I knew she'd get a kick out of seeing me raked over the coals.

Then I told them what I knew, what I thought I knew, and one way I hoped I could prove it. During my third telling, Billie arrived. They asked if she knew "this yo-yo."

Reluctantly, she admitted it. Gritting her teeth, she vouched for me.

She looked sensational. She'd cut her long red-brown hair to neck length, the silky tresses forming around her cheeks. I wanted to say something, but there was no time—if what I believed was true, proving it meant acting fast.

Nobody liked my idea, except for its expediency. The police wanted to send one of their own men, but I convinced them I had a better chance of getting in. If I saw anything incriminating, something that might be destroyed before they could get a warrant, I could admit them to the Gramercy townhouse.

I climbed the marble steps for a second time that evening and pushed the intercom buzzer several times to the tune of "Für Elise."

A scratchy voice came back, "Who is it?"

"Payton Sherwood. More questions."

"Go away."

I didn't know if she was listening, but I said, "You never lost your keys."

Silence. A curtain moved behind a narrow stained-glass window

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of the upper floor. I saw a distorted view of her face behind one ruby panel. Seeing if I was alone.

The door lock buzzed and I went inside.

The hallway's coziness had diminished, the warm glow now a murkiness casting the corners of the stairwell into shadow.

A door creaked open on the upper landing and from the wedge of light, Celia Janssen stepped out wearing a white terrycloth robe. Her hair was wet, but not as if she'd been in the shower, more like she'd been sweating.

She walked to the head of the stairs and stared down at me.

"What do you want?"

"Your key to Gramercy Park."

"What?"

"Your keys were stolen two days ago, but you still have your key to the park." I advanced a step up the stairs. "That bothered me. I guess it's hard to part with privilege."

"You're not making sense."

"It doesn't mean anything, of course," I said. "But it got me thinking. Then there was the way you acted at the restaurant, as if you wanted someone to steal your purse. Maybe you did. Part of your plan."

"Are you insane?"

"Have your purse stolen and claim your keys and wallet were inside. Make it look like someone used them to get in here and kill your uncle." I gripped the banister as I moved up, my dry palm squeaking on its smooth surface. "Too bad you didn't snag some homeless guy or junkie, you might've pulled it off. But you had to settle for a runaway girl."

"You're trying to protect her. Is that why you're making all this up?"

"No one can protect her anymore. You killed her tonight."

Celia tried to look surprised, but all I saw was her fear. I took two steps at a time.

"You got scared when I asked to see you about your purse. You thought I was a threat, maybe a blackmailer. Is that why you brought me to the park, kept us in the shadows? Did you have your knife with you then?"

She didn't seem to hear or sense me in any way, distracted as if she were busy dividing multiple fractions in her head.

I shouted, "I *was* a threat. I knew who the girl was. What if I found her? What would she tell me? Would I believe her? You

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couldn't take that chance, so when I left, you followed. And I *led* you to her. I helped you kill her."

"Get out of here! Or I'll—"

I didn't remember getting to the top of the stairs but suddenly I was on the landing, my hands reaching out for her.

She backed away from me, collided with the wall, and knocked one of the hanging photos to the floor, the glass shattering.

She tried to get by me but I grabbed her arms and twisted them. I wanted to hurt her. I could feel the slender bones in my grip. And something else, a dampness under my left hand, seeping through my fingers.

I held up her arm and examined where I'd grabbed her. The sleeve was wet with blood. She must've walked home from the park and hadn't had time to change. Beneath the robe, her blouse was still soaked with the dead girl's blood.

She tried to shake me loose, but I held on and dragged her with me into the next room until I found the intercom and buzzed in the police. Then I went and washed my hands.

I only got to see Billie for a moment outside the townhouse before they escorted me to a car and downtown for more questioning. Her smile and quick wink were the only good things about the new day.

It was dawn before they finally cut me loose. The sky was the color of faded blue jeans. Outside I saw people jogging, walking their dogs, slurping coffee in one hand and skimming headlines in the other. I hadn't slept in thirty-three hours, but didn't feel the fatigue. Didn't feel anything. Missy Strich was dead and in some way I'd help make her that way. And now I had to face her parents and tell them.

I smoked a cigarette, then flagged down a cab and told the driver to take me to the Lincoln Towers Hotel.

Before I could ask the desk clerk to ring the Strichs' room, someone shouted my name across the climate-controlled marble lobby. In the Rose Lounge, Walter and Louise Strich waved table napkins at me from where they sat eating a continental breakfast.

Mrs. Strich's eyes were fretful with concern over my bruises and torn pantleg.

"Oh dear, you look awful, Mr. Sherwood. What's happened to you?"

"Rough night."

Mr. Strich was forking fried egg into his mouth and smiling.

"Not working for us, I hope," he said between chews.

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"I'm afraid I was . . . I'm sorry." I breathed deeply. "I have some news—"

"—Nooo," Mrs. Strich cooed, "we're the ones who are sorry. We should've called you last night."

"It's bad news, Mrs. Strich."

"Don't be silly. We have wonderful news. Missy called."

"What?" I said. "Called you? When did you talk to her?"

"A little after ten."

Ten o'clock, I thought. Two hours before—

"You'll never guess where she is," Mr. Strich said.

On a cold steel table, her flesh gray under lights without warmth.

"She's home! In New Hampshire." He raised his coffee cup in a toast.

I couldn't quite process it, wasn't sure I'd heard right.

"That's right," Mrs. Strich said. "We must've literally passed each other on the highway. She got a ride from a Vermont family coming back from dropping their son off at NYU. She didn't need the money after all. Can you believe we made such a big deal of that?"

"I don't understand."

"She got a ride home with a friend's parents. A new boyfriend, I think. The Lord was looking after her," Mrs. Strich said, tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm just sorry we put you to so much trouble."

"No trouble," I said. "It's fine."

I stood up. I wanted to get out of there. I took Melissa Strich's photo from my pocket and handed it to her father.

"I won't be needing this then."

As it left my hand, I saw it was the wrong photo, the Polaroid of the girl with the green dreadlocks and pierced lower lip. Mr. Strich stared at it, looking lost.

"What is *this?*"

"It's . . . someone else's daughter." ●

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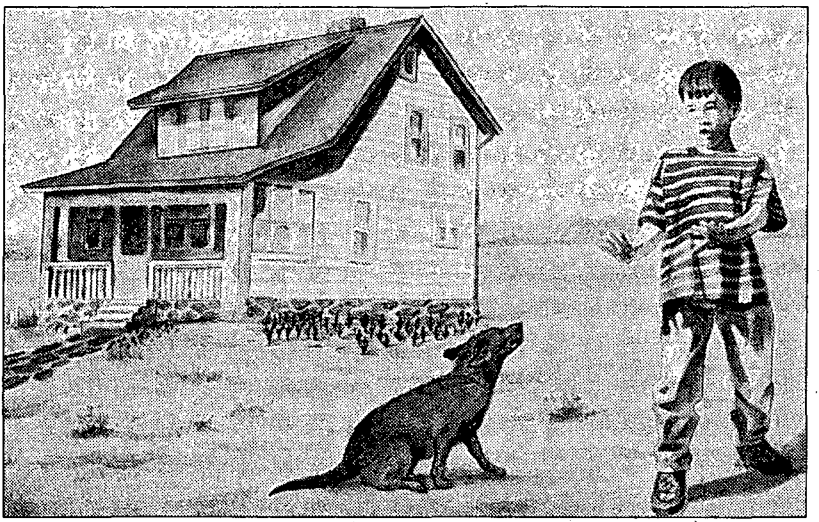

Art by Steve Cavallo

TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

by Carolyn Wheat

Randall Toller walked to school with a slow gait, dragging his feet as if to slow down time as well as his seven-year-old steps. His arm hurt. He squinched up his eyes and tried to push the pictures away. Tried to forget the rage on his mother's face as she'd grabbed his arm and yanked him out of the closet.

It was his fault his arm hurt. If he hadn't taken so long getting dressed, then she wouldn't have gotten so mad. But how was he supposed to know how long to take? Last week she'd sent him back to change his shirt because he'd put on what every boy in the world except him was old enough to know was a church shirt instead of a school shirt. She'd given him a good smack for that one; the red mark was still on his cheek when he got to school. When Miss Roth asked what happened, he said he got brushed by a blackberry bush.

He was supposed to stop by the Olson house and walk the rest

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of the way with Bobby, the youngest son. He didn't like Bobby, who was big and loud and bullying, just like his brothers. But Ma said it was good to get in with the Olsons since they had the biggest farm in the county, so she ordered Randall to walk to school with Bobby just as she ordered his father to play pool with Ole Olson, patriarch of the big blond clan. Randall wondered if his mother wanted Pa to lose to Mr. Olson or if that was Pa's own idea.

He dawdled and dragged his feet as he approached the big white house where the Olson family lived. It wasn't just Bobby he was afraid of, it was all the Olsons. They joked with him, played little games like asking him questions about his parents, and then laughed when he couldn't answer.

Didn't they know? Didn't they know you weren't supposed to tell tales out of school?

That was the rule in his house. No tales out of school.

One time he sat at the Olson breakfast table having a glass of milk; Bobby was clowning with baby Ellen and dropped his glass on the floor. Randall had stiffened, waiting for the explosion. But Mrs. Olson just laughed, called Bobby a clumsy kid, and picked up the mess with a dishrag.

Randall supposed Mrs. Olson didn't want tales out of school; she'd probably punish Bobby later, when he wasn't there.

When he and Bobby were together, trudging through the November snow, he asked how Bobby felt knowing all day in school that his punishment waited for him at home. Personally, Randall would rather get it over with, but sometimes his mother did that. Sent him to school with a promise that when he got home, he'd pay for what he'd done that morning. He'd spend the whole day squirming in his seat, losing track of the day's lesson and making stupid answers to Miss Roth's questions, because his mind was full of the punishment that waited for him at home.

Dead Man's Thoughts (St. Martin's, 1983), the first book to feature her protagonist Cass Jameson, brought defense attorney Carolyn Wheat a nomination for the Edgar Allan Poe Award. She followed up that success in 1986 with *Where Nobody Dies,* but recently her attention has been directed to short stories, where she packs a powerful punch.

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Bobby had looked at him like he was crazy. Punishment for what? he'd asked.

Randall shut up at once, new respect for Bobby filling his heart. Here was a boy who really knew the meaning of tales out of school. He wasn't going to admit to Randall that there would be a punishment.

Bobby Olson's uncle was crazy. This was a known fact and one that fascinated Randall. He asked his father what it was like to be crazy; Pa had replied that crazy people could do what they liked when they liked until they got too crazy and had to go to the County Home, which was where Lars Olson spent ten years of his crazy life.

Now he was out of the Home and living with the Olsons until he could find a place of his own.

Randall made a point of studying Lars Olson, but he really didn't seem different from other grownups. He was big like all the Olsons; he worked on the farm alongside Ole and the two oldest boys, Tom and Roger. He did have a habit of breaking into laughter over nothing, which scared Randall a little bit since he never knew when his mother's laughter would turn to sarcastic jibes and then to something worse. But Lars just laughed; nothing more. At least when Randall was around. And he knew better than to ask Bobby; no tales out of school.

Almost there. The dirt road leading to the Olson place was muddy with spring rain; violets lined the path, but not planted, just there. The tulips by the side of the house were planted, in colorful rows like toy soldiers. Yellow-and-red and red with white borders and purple that was almost black.

He was going so slow he was almost walking backwards.

He wasn't exactly sure why. He just knew something was wrong today. Something bad had happened inside the Olson house. Something a stranger shouldn't see.

He stopped on the flagstone path. Stopped cold and realized why he knew something was wrong. Blackie wasn't there. Blackie hadn't run up to him and nipped at his ankles the way he always did. Bobby laughed when Blackie grabbed Randall's pants leg and shook his terrier head back and forth and Randall cried out.

"Scared of a little puppy," Bobby had jeered, but Mrs. Olson had told Bobby to be quiet and put the puppy in another room while she poured Randall a glass of milk. Randall had buried his face in the glass, hoping to still the trembling of his lips. He'd almost cried, the puppy had scared him so much.

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The puppy always ran out, barking, whenever someone came up the walk.

Where was it today?

Randall looked around. No puppy. No sounds of any kind. No milking machine noise, no tractor noise. No clinking of bottles in the shed where Tom and Roger ran the bottling machine. No telephone ringing inside, no kid noises wafting out through the half-open kitchen window.

The Olsons were a noisy family. Randall had never heard the big white house so quiet.

He tiptoed up the front steps, peered into the window, through the lace curtains. It looked as if Mr. Olson was lying on the floor in the living room. Just lying there.

Sometimes Randall's dad slept downstairs on the couch. He'd usually have his blanket folded neatly into a square before Randall got up, but once in a while Randall had come downstairs to see his father lying on the couch, snoring. He knew it was one of those things he shouldn't talk about, so he never did.

But Mr. Olson wasn't on the couch. He was on the floor, and he was lying on his stomach.

Randall didn't think Mr. Olson would want a neighbor boy to see him that way, so he tiptoed back down the porch steps and walked around to the kitchen.

That was where he saw Blackie.

Blackie was dead. Randall knew what it meant when the flies buzzed around like that. Besides, no animal could be lying in that big a pool of blood and still be alive.

His father had told him that. He'd said people have only so much blood inside and when they lose it, they're dead.

Blackie was dead.

Had Mrs. Olson killed him to punish Bobby for something, the way Randall's mother had killed his kitten when he was little?

Randall swallowed a lump in his throat as he remembered his kitten. He'd named the kitten Hopalong because of the way he jumped out at you and clawed at your shoelaces. Hoppy, for short.

It was his fault Hoppy was dead. Ma had said he could have the kitten as long as he was good, but he hadn't been good, so the kitten had to die.

Poor Bobby. He'd really loved that puppy; he was going to feel real bad if something he'd done had made his mother kill Blackie.

Randall stood on tiptoe, his old-fashioned leather shoes creaking a little. He peered over the top of the windowsill and looked inside.

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The kitchen was red.

No, it wasn't. It was yellow. Yellow and blue. But then why was there red all over everything? The table looked as if a new piece of bright red oilcloth had been spread over it, and the floor was—

Oh, no. Randall sank back on his heels and looked at the dead dog. The red in the kitchen looked just like the red under the puppy's head.

The bile came up without warning, and Randall was sick all over his shoes and the tulips.

He had to go to school. Ma would be mad if he was late and the teacher sent a complaint.

He'd have to go to school without Bobby.

The teacher would ask where Bobby was.

Should Randall lie? He gave the matter some thought as he stepped briskly out of the Olsons' yard and headed along the road to town. Should he tell Miss Roth that Bobby wasn't feeling well today?

Sometimes Ma told Miss Roth that he wasn't feeling well when the truth was Ma had hit him where it showed.

His stomach hurt. It hurt from the pain of looking at all that blood. It hurt from worrying about what to say at school. If he told tales out of school, he'd be punished for telling other people's business. If he lied, he'd be punished for lying.

He'd told his mother he never wanted another kitten.

Sometimes he was afraid she'd get him one.

In the end, all he said to Miss Roth was, "Bobby won't be in school today."

The next morning, in the teachers' room at the little country schoolhouse, Miss Roth spoke her mind.

"Did you ever hear such a thing?" she asked without expecting or desiring a reply. "He comes to school bold as brass and sits in his classes not saying a word. When I asked him where Bobby Olson was, he just said Bobby wouldn't be in school today." She paused for effect and refreshed herself with another sip of tea from the bone-china cup.

"Wouldn't be in school! When the poor child was lying in a pool of his own blood, that crazy uncle of his gone clean out of his head and hacked the whole family to pieces! And all that stupid child could find to say was Bobby won't be in school today." She shook her head yet again at the wonder of it all.

"Somebody," she pronounced, "ought to take a switch to that Toller boy." ●

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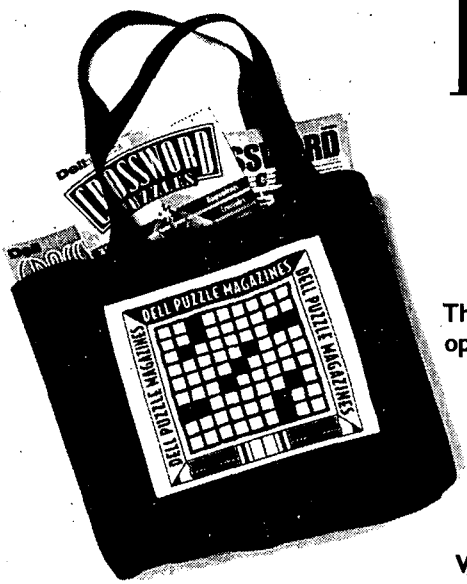

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Harry's Tax Charity Case

by Jim Weikart

"If you don't pay taxes, you're a rich man." That's what I tell all my clients. Do anything to get that tax deduction. I've even told Molly she'd do better as a charity. Molly's the thin black woman cadging quarters outside Papa Joe's Deli near 99th and Broadway. "Molly," I told her, "if you had a 501 C 3 charity tax status and gave receipts, people would give you a lot more quarters."

"You never give me no change," she said in reply.

"But I would if I could get a tax deduction. Charity starts with a tax deduction."

She stuck her tongue out and went on to her next prospect.

Her loss. What did I care? All my enrolled agent experience with taxes given to her free—and just between you and me, I don't mind stretching numbers—and she sticks out her tongue!

Talk about charity cases. One day late last December, I had this dame came into the office. . . . Sure, I know dame's an archaic

The June issue of *EQMM* goes on sale the day after most of our readers have met Uncle Sam's most inexorable deadline. Before you let taxes slip from your mind for another year, have a look at Jim Weikart's send-up of the eternal search for a loophole. When he isn't writing fiction, Mr. Weikart is to be found at Weikart Associates, where he is an enrolled agent and a founding partner. His published novels are *Casualty Loss* and *Harry's Last Tax Cut* (Walker & Co.).

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word. But she was into vintage clothing and I think "dame" gives you the picture. She was young, Asian, and good-looking. Maybe Korean: round face, heart-shaped lips, slanted exotic black eyes but with a straight Brooklyn accent. The vintage clothing was an outfit that reminded me of the sixties. A light blue dress with a jacket. All straight lines and large buttons that didn't work and cut just above the knees. And a matching pillbox hat!

"Elizabeth Feldstein," she said even before I had the door to my office closed. "Just call me Liz."

"How'd you get a name like that?" I said. "You don't look like a Fieldstein."

Her laugh was like sparkling water being poured over ice. Make that ice with some Johnny Walker Black on the bottom.

"Feldstein," she corrected, "I'm adopted." She smiled at me and then reached out and patted me on the arm. "But it's divorce that brings me here. Divorce always means trouble."

Divorce means available, I'm thinking. So what if she's twenty years younger. My tax office is in the front of my apartment, the basement unit of a five-story brownstone on 103rd Street off West End. And if you think I don't want to get some of those single-lady clients down the hall into my bedroom, you're crazy. Especially women like this good-looking Korean dame.

I took her wool coat and motioned to the chair next to my desk. It's along the side, so we were as close as we could be without her feeling funny about it. I took out a yellow pad and wrote her name at the top. "So what's the problem, Liz?"

"Well, Mr. Sage . . . ."

"Please, call me Harry."

"Okay . . . Harry. It all started when my father divorced my mother. . . . And then my mother decided to marry my father."

I put the pen down. "Slow down, Liz. You're beginning to confuse me already. Married. Divorced. Divorced. Married. What's it going to be? People get back together. It's happened."

"Not this time." She smiled once more. But with such a lingering sadness that I just waited for her to continue. She looked me directly in the eyes.

" 'So,' you say, 'why is she coming to see a crooked tax man? What kind of advice can I give her?' "

I frowned for the first time since she'd arrived. As I said, I don't mind stretching the numbers, but when a new client shows up suggesting she sought me out because of a rep-

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utation for being crooked, I don't like it.

"Say, Liz, who sent you to me, anyway?"

She reached out and patted my arm again, although this time I barely noticed. "Don't worry, Harry. I'm not an IRS plant."

I opened my drawer and dropped my pen into it as I stood up. "I don't know what you are, but I know what you aren't. You aren't my client."

I walked past her and opened the door to let her out.

She didn't move except to turn in her chair and smile at me again. "You're cute when you're virtuous, Harry. You should try it more often. Maybe I'll sleep with you after all."

I couldn't believe what she was saying. I shut the door and started for her but she waved me toward my desk.

"Not now, Harry. Maybe later, if we can finish our work."

Okay, I'll admit it, she had me off balance. I don't remember the last time a good-looking dame *offered* to sleep with me. I sat down and opened my drawer. The pen had slid under the mess there and it took me a minute to fish it out.

"Why don't you tell me exactly what it is I can do for you."

She leaned forward and looked me straight in the eye, grasping my forearm firmly with her hand. She talked for a few minutes in a garbled way about a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars and an auction and taxes. Then she shocked me one more time. She started to cry! "We've been arguing for days and then I decided to just go ahead and do it and—"

"Okay, that does it," I said. I pulled away from her and stood up. "I'm going into the kitchen to make two cups of coffee. It's Taster's Choice and I do it in the microwave. When I get back, be ready with your story or be gone. Got it?"

But she wasn't listening to me. She was looking past me at the door and I heard the doorbell ring. My door has glass panels covered by sheer linen curtains that allow me to see who's at the door without being seen from the outside. He was the biggest Asian guy I've ever seen. And he quickly stopped ringing and started pounding like he meant business. Liz did something new. She went as pale as an upside-down dead flounder.

"Harry, that's my father. You've got to hide me. If he catches me here he'll know what I'm doing. He'll kill me, Harry. He'll kill us both." She jumped to her feet and looked around the office.

I could feel bad about her tears, but it wouldn't ruin my whole day. My getting killed was different. I grabbed her by the arm and

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hustled her down the hallway into my bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, wringing her hands.

"I should have thrown you out," I said.

She looked up and gave me a sexy pout. "Please don't tell him. I swear he will kill us both."

You can bet I took a couple of deep breaths as I headed down the hall. The pounding was harder than ever. I pulled the curtain back so I could see this guy more clearly and then he could see me too.

"I'm closed," I said. But he must have been a specialist at tai-kwan-do or hitum-whackum-getum. His fist came right through the glass in a panel. He grabbed me by my dark blue paisley neck-tie and pulled me up to his face, although there was another panel of glass between us—my nose was pressed against one side with his on the other.

"You can open the door for me?" he said very politely, but I got the idea it wasn't a question.

"Sure, calm down," I said, although it was hard to get the words out right with my lips smashed up against the glass. He let go of me and I saw blood where he had gotten cut from his glass trick. Even hitum-whackum-getum can have its drawbacks.

But I'm a man of my word when I have my wits scared out of me. I opened the door. "You looking for a good tax guy?"

He brushed past me and into the center of my office, spinning around and looking in every corner.

"My daughter. She came here to see you, eh? She wants you to do some tax giveaway for her?"

Since the door was still open and I was closer to it than he was, I might have jumped and run. But he took out something I'd never seen before and laid it on my desk: a five-hundred-dollar bill! I pushed the door closed.

"Well, well," I said, circling him to get to my chair, "I'm as reasonable as the next man." I reached for the bill but he grabbed my hand at the wrist. His eyes narrowed.

"Where is my daughter?"

I was about to say, "Your daughter is in my bedroom," but it stuck in my throat. Instead I said, "Your name Feldstein?"

He let go of my wrist, pulled out a business card, and threw it down on my desk. Not quite the bowing and presenting I'd heard of between business equals in his part of the world, but the five hundred was still on my desk so I picked up the card. It was in

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Korean. As far as I knew he could be offering his services to train me in hitum-whackum-getum. I couldn't make out the name "Feldstein" anywhere.

When I looked up I saw Liz's red wool coat hanging on the chair behind him. He hadn't seen it yet.

"I want you to get my daughter for me. It's very important I talk to her, eh?" He was glowering and he hadn't taken his seat yet. He had on a gray Armani suit and wingtip shoes. The tie, bright yellow with navy blue polka dots, was straight United States boardroom power. I saw some kind of electronic device, maybe a portable phone—or a gun—inside his jacket.

"That's a very nice tie," I said.

I guess he wanted to get a closer look at mine. He reached across and yanked it close to his face again. This time he was "in my face" with no glass separating us. I got a close look at the cut on his hand, which was now dripping blood onto the yellow pad with Liz Feldstein written on it. I hoped he wouldn't look down.

"I'm going to start counting, Mr. Tax Man. One, eh? Two, eh? Three, eh? Four, eh?"

I wasn't sure what the point of the counting was (it emphasized that little language problem he had of ending each statement with a question mark) but I was thinking I should figure it out before he got to the end.

The doorbell saved me. We both looked around like lovers caught *in delicto*, and through the sheer linen curtains we could see a woman. A Korean woman. He let go of my tie.

"Hey, you got a closet or something?"

I caught my breath and pointed to the front coat closet. He bounded across the room and was into it before I could say "Jack freaking Robinson." I scooped the five-hundred-dollar bill into the top drawer of the desk and dropped back into my chair.

Now she was pounding, but she didn't have to break any glass. The door hadn't latched after the big guy and it swung open under the blows.

She was middle-aged. A little spread through the midriff, but with sharp black eyes like the Liz in the bedroom. It startled me how much her face looked like Liz's. So that's what happens to Korean dames, I thought. They get old like the American ones. It crossed my mind—only fleetingly—that this Korean broad must be younger than me.

"You are Mr. Harry Sage?"

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Accent, but none of the funny little question marks at the end like the big guy in the closet who was so scared of her. I nodded.

"You can help with the income tax returns?"

All I said was yes and she started to cry. I got up and helped her sit down. Then I turned, intent on leaving my office to the invaders, but she stopped me with five little words.

"How much do you want?"

I closed the door and sank into the chair beside it.

"Pardon me?"

"I want you to help us. Her father doesn't understand. He won't listen to us. He is so angry. I just need to find him and explain. He refuses to talk."

She had taken her checkbook out and poised a pen. The Korean had been good for five hundred. But was he a client? Putting five hundred on the desk and saying nothing about it didn't lead to a professional relationship.

"My retainer is generally one thousand dollars."

She wrote the check and passed it to me where I sat next to the door. The name on the check was Sue Lee Feldstein.

"How can I assist you?"

"Why are you whispering?" she asked.

"Sudden laryngitis," I said. I didn't feel like telling her about the guy in the closet.

"Your name is Feldstein?"

She nodded. She was looking me over when suddenly a look of horror came over her face. I couldn't understand what she saw that came as such a shock until I sensed a shadow at the door behind me and turned to see what she was looking at.

Another woman. More broads than I could handle. American, this time. As I stood, Sue Lee jumped up too. It was all I could do to catch her before she had ripped open the closet door.

"Hide me," she said. "It's Liz's mother. She must not find me here."

I recovered quickly, refrained from saying I thought Sue Lee looked a lot more likely to be Liz's mother than the woman at the door, and shuttled her down the hallway and into the bathroom. I left her standing against the towel racks with her face in her hands.

On the way back to the office I took a peek in the bedroom. Liz had changed into my old Levi's and blue workshirt. She was putting the vintage outfit on a hanger in my closet.

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"Has he gone?"

"He's in the closet. Somebody calling herself Mrs. Feldstein is in the bathroom. Somebody else I'm sure you know is at the front door."

"Harry, don't tell them I'm here." She looked at me pleadingly as the doorbell sounded again.

The woman at the front door was about my age, with brown shoulder-length hair cut in a flip. She wore a red jacket and had a Diane Sawyer face: all beautiful angles and blue eyes. "I know you're Harry Sage."

I nodded.

"I'm Mrs. Feldstein."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Unfazed, she marched right in and over to my desk. I closed the door. And this time I locked it. No more surprises.

"I'm sure this is one of the most bizarre tax things you've ever been asked to do," she began.

I nodded hopefully. "I need a retainer if you're hiring me."

She eyed me coldly and handed over a Visa card.

"One thousand, five hundred dollars," I whispered as I ran the card through the machine I keep hidden in a drawer of my desk.

Without even flinching she signed the receipt.

"Now tell me . . ." I started to say.

But she had glanced down and saw Liz's name written on the yellow pad with the bloodstains beside it. It stopped her cold.

"What's this?" She was on her feet in a second, her face pale as she stared at the blood and the name. "What have you done to my daughter?"

I would have answered her but the doorbell was ringing.

There was a bald guy behind the glass. American. White. He had a fringe of hair beneath the bald spot and a beard.

"Oh, my God," she said. "Liz's father. He can't know I'm here. He hates me meddling in his affairs." She stumbled toward the door that concealed the Korean but I caught her hand and guided her down the hall to the linen closet. She didn't protest when I shoved her inside.

"My wife here?" the bald guy asked.

"You Mr. Feldstein?"

"I see you know the name."

"Several times over. But I can't help you."

He scratched his chin and glanced up and down the street:

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"Can I use your phone?"

I shrugged and let him come in, realizing too late that I couldn't let him use my desk. Not only could the Korean guy hear him, but he would see Liz's name and the bloodstain.

"That one's on the fritz. You'll have to use the kitchen phone."

He followed me into the kitchen, and I pointed to the phone on the wall. He picked it up and started to dial. He was facing me when behind him I saw Liz tiptoe past the door. She still had on my clothes. Her Korean mother followed her. The mother gave me a polite bow as she passed, and Feldstein raised his eyebrows at the surprised look on my face.

The next thing I knew I was hearing the portable phone in the Korean guy's pocket ringing in the closet. I heard his answer, loud enough that I got it both through the phone Feldstein was holding and from the man in the closet.

"What?" Feldstein said. He rushed out of the kitchen as the closet door opened and the big guy stepped out. They began arguing loudly in Korean until finally they stumbled out the door, gesturing wildly. "Liz" was the only word I could understand.

When I was sure they'd gone, I went to the linen closet. Mrs. Feldstein, the American, stood quietly inside.

"It's safe to go now," I told her.

She thanked me and got out, never mentioning the fifteen hundred dollars I had charged on her Visa card.

Believe you me, I got out the Johnny Walker Black and took a good belt, letting it shoot right down. I should have just continued to drink until I felt relaxed, but no, I had to go into the bedroom. In the closet I found the vintage dress and jacket hanging neatly on a hanger, with the pillbox hat on the shelf above. I sat on the edge of the bed drinking my scotch and fantasizing what might have been. Then I glanced at my alarm clock. The hell with these people. I knew how to turn this deal into a tax advantage for me. The Salvation Army on 96th Street was open for another half-hour. I folded the dress and put it into a paper bag with the hat on top. Then I walked down and turned the bag over to John Derry, who takes the drop-offs at the Army. He knows me well because I'm in there every week with a bag of junk for a tax receipt.

"It's a vintage dress in excellent condition," I told him, "and this time I'm telling the truth."

"If you say so, Harry. We don't put values on this crap. You

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know that." He handed me the usual blank receipt. In his presence I wrote, "One vintage dress circa nineteen sixty, worth two hundred dollars."

"See you next week," he called as I went out.

The phone was ringing when I opened the door at home.

"Harry, it's Liz."

"No kidding. Wow. Hey, Liz, did we have a good time or what?"

"I'm sorry I had to run. I want to come back and see you. I hid the outfit in your closet. I'll give you back your clothes and get mine."

"Forget it."

"Harry, don't be angry." She sounded like she was scolding a presumptuous child.

"I mean you're too late. I got rid of the dress. You can keep the duds."

There was a very long silence. "You what?"

"I got rid of the dress. I gave it to the Salvation Army. I even got a receipt for a two-hundred-dollar tax deduction as a fair market value."

Silence again and then a long intake of breath. "Harry, that dress belonged to Jackie Kennedy. She wore it during a *Life* magazine photo shoot at the White House in 1962. Its antique value is one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars!"

I hung up on her. And I hit the street running. My God, what had I done! But I was too late. The Army was closed up tight. I ran up and down Broadway looking for John Derry. No luck at all.

At home, the bunch of them were waiting outside my door. Sure, Liz was there. So was the big Korean guy. He stood next to the Caucasian Mrs. Feldstein. The Korean Mrs. Feldstein stood closer to the guy who called himself Mr. Feldstein.

"Harry, we need to talk," Liz said.

I nodded and opened my door. They crowded in behind me and I had to get one chair from the kitchen to accommodate everyone.

Liz started to speak but I held up my hand to silence her.

"I think maybe introductions are in order," I said.

Liz looked around and got a nod from each person there. "Okay, Harry, here we go." She pointed to the brown-haired, blue-eyed woman. "I'd like to introduce my mother—my adoptive mother—Jane Feldstein."

Mrs. Jane Feldstein inclined her head slightly toward me and I nodded back.

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"And here is my biological mother, Sue Lee Feldstein." I turned toward the Korean woman, surprised once again by the name. Mrs. Sue Lee Feldstein bowed more formally from her chair.

Liz was pointing to baldy with the beard. "And my adoptive father, Marc Feldstein." Mr. Marc Feldstein got up and shook my hand across the desk. I did not rise to meet him.

Liz turned and stood as she gestured toward the Korean. "And my biological father, Sammy Young Chung." Mr. Chung got up from the couch and bowed to me. I nodded my head, which was spinning at this point. Liz was smiling brightly.

"You see, my adoptive father and mother divorced and my adoptive father married my biological mother. So when I told you my father was divorcing my mother and my mother was marrying my father, I was telling you the truth!"

The proverbial light went on in my brain. There really were two Mrs. Feldsteins!

"But how? What? I've never heard of . . ."

Liz put out her hand and took hold of my forearm. "You see, my adoptive parents took me back to Korea a couple of years ago. A roots tour. The agency that helped in my adoption was able to trace my mother. What a reunion that was with my Korean mother. We were all thrilled. But her husband had died. And my parents were on the verge of divorce."

Mr. Feldstein butted in. "So when Sue Lee and I felt this attraction for one another, and we shared the same daughter, it was only natural that we began to follow through on it. After my wife and I divorced, Sue Lee and I married."

"And I got two complete mothers!" Liz exclaimed.

Then she went on. "And my Korean mother knew where my biological father was living. Mr. Chung was an executive with Hyundai Motor Company. He was delighted to see us."

She stopped and I glanced around at all of them. "Well, congratulations to everybody. It's a good story, but it ain't got nothing to do with me."

"Well, it does now. When my father—my biological father—was a young man back in nineteen sixty-two, he worked in the Korean Embassy in Washington. On the day of the *Life* shoot, he was delivering a message to President Kennedy. He didn't know English so well then and he made a wrong turn. Imagine him as a young man opening a door on Jackie Kennedy, the First Lady, crying inconsolably. She had on the dress I was wearing today and he

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thought she was so beautiful he fell to his knees in front of her. She looked up and stopped crying, touched by his gesture.

"He told her in broken English how joyful he was to meet the beautiful First Lady. His obvious pleasure made her laugh. She took him to the President herself. As they parted, he told her he hoped his own wife would someday have a dress as beautiful as hers. She smiled and thanked him. Several days later he received a box and inside was the dress she had worn for *Life* magazine, with a note from Jackie saying how much it had lifted her spirits to meet him."

Liz smiled at everyone and they smiled back. "You see, his English wasn't very good and Jackie Kennedy must have thought he had a wife."

Mr. Chung nodded. "But I was smart, eh? I put the dress away with the note."

Liz went on. "At Sue Lee's wedding to Marc Feldstein, Sammy Young Chung gave them Jackie's outfit as a wedding gift. An heirloom for the family that everyone knew would benefit their mutual interest — their daughter, me! Sammy was furious when he found out we wanted to cash it in. He'd given it in the hope that it would be handed down to his grandchildren, so that they too could share in the honor of his meeting with the First Lady. When he found out what we planned to do, I thought he really might kill Dad—that's Marc—and me."

Her parents were nodding their heads in agreement—all four of them.

It was my turn, and no more Mr. Nice Guy. "It's a fascinating story. But you left the dress voluntarily and I've given it away." I didn't mention that I intended to be at the Salvation Army when the doors opened. John Derry would give it back for free.

The big Korean got up from the couch and came at me. I shrank back instinctively. Liz caught his coat sleeve as he passed her.

"Wait a second, Pop."

She looked at me with gimlet eye. "You disappoint me, Harry. You're being very shortsighted. I see you think you'll go down to the Salvation Army and reclaim the outfit for yourself. But it won't work. Do you know why it won't work?"

If I had been sitting in Liz's chair I suppose I would have described myself as shifty-eyed as I looked at each of their faces, trying to comprehend my options.

She turned to Jane and was handed a piece of paper en-

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cased in a protective clear-plastic cover.

"Because you don't have the letter from Jackie to my father. The letter documents the historic value of the outfit."

"Damn." Yes, I said it right out loud. Liz gave me one of the smiles that fit her eyes so well.

"So what's it going to be, Harry?"

I tried to stare her down. But I blinked first.

"We could still do business," she said. She leaned toward me. If she'd been close enough she'd have grasped my forearm one more time, even with all those parents watching.

"Here's the deal. You see, my father—Marc—wanted to sell the dress at auction to a museum or collector. It might be worth one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars. Who knows? I took it in to get it evaluated. You know the guy."

Liz turned to her mother again and was passed another sheet of paper. This one I recognized as a tax form for charity assessments.

"See, here's his signature, Jerome Davidson. He assesses things, more or less at their value, for donation. He said to ask you how we could make more money than by doing the auction."

They all leaned forward then, looking at me.

I got it and I nodded. "You want to know about the tax charity scam."

Liz frowned. "What do you mean, 'charity *scam*'?"

"You take the outfit to Sotheby's for auction. Bids are made; the dress might get a hundred thousand dollars. More likely it would be less. Who knows? Maybe ten thousand dollars instead of a hundred. Out of whatever you get, you have to give Sotheby's ten percent. What you have left is all taxable profit, so another half goes to the IRS and New York State. Even if you got the hundred grand, you'd pocket less than fifty thousand. More likely you'd get a smaller bid and be left with much less.

"But I can tell you a way to guarantee you get over fifty thousand tax free. And I think you're all smart enough to understand exactly what I'm talking about."

Marc Feldstein leaned forward even further. "That's what we're here for."

I went on. "You have an assessed fair market value of one hundred twenty-five thousand for the outfit. If you donate it to a charity that's going to use it in their collection, a museum like the Smithsonian, you get a tax deduction for the full one hundred

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twenty-five thousand dollars. Tax saved, if you're in the highest bracket, would be close to sixty thousand bucks."

They looked around at each other. "That is very good news, Harry," Liz said.

"Right. You make the money as a tax benefit and you never have to subject yourself to the whim of the market place."

Liz beamed at me. "That's why we're here. Because you're so smart. And you know all the angles."

This was interesting. "But it won't work if Mr. Feldstein has a low income. You've got no income, you get no tax break and get nothing for a gift to charity. And, hey, if Mr. Feldstein has a high income, why's he giving away this family heirloom?"

Marc Feldstein butted in. "Liz is studying at New York University. Tuition and expenses are killing us. I won a lottery ticket this year for two hundred thousand dollars." He stopped to let me savor his good luck. "Other years I make next to nothing as a private-school teacher. It opened up this idea for us. We need to use this window of opportunity. Sammy Young Chung wanted to keep the outfit in the family. But today we convinced him this is our best opportunity to do the most for Liz."

All three of the others were nodding in agreement.

"I see," I said, looking at the calendar. "You just have a couple of days to make the donation before the end of December."

They were all nodding again.

"But," I corrected them, "no outfit, no donation."

Liz jumped to her feet. "Damn you, Harry. It's fair game for anyone at the Salvation Army. And even if you got it back, it's no good to you."

Her Korean father was rising again behind her. I got to my feet too. But Liz stepped between us again.

"I tell you what, Harry. You don't have it. We don't have it. This is all theoretical. We're going to leave you now. And if we still need your services, we will be back here in the morning."

She spun around and headed for the door. The others followed.

"Okay, okay," I said to their backs, but they weren't listening. I still had the five-hundred-dollar bill, the thousand-dollar check, and the fifteen-hundred-dollar Visa card receipt in my drawer.

Rasp, rasp, rasp, rasp. Nobody bothers a middle-aged white male sawing at a padlock at 2:00 A.M. Yes, I was in front of the Salvation Army on 96th Street running my hacksaw back and forth on

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the single padlock holding the rolling gate down. In a supermarket bag I had a crowbar and flashlight. The Army folks weren't exactly geared for a break-in. Free used clothing wasn't much of a crime target. I pretended to be as casual as one can be while sawing loudly through a metal lock in the middle of the night. I suppose it took ten minutes. It felt like two hours. Then the metal gate rolling up sounded like a bunch of Hells Angels' cycles. I walked away to let my nerves calm down. When I went back with the crowbar, the door forced open easily. I was laughing quietly, patting myself on the back.

But I had congratulated myself too soon. The outfit wasn't on the women's clothes rack. I found my paper bag in the trash. Empty. No outfit! I searched that place from top to bottom. After an hour of scattering bags of dirty clothes I was pushing my luck. I grabbed a pair of roller blades with one roller missing, my size, and a Sony Diskman with no earphones and got out.

Outside, I started up toward Broadway. Damned if Jackie's outfit, jacket, hat, and all wasn't walking right toward me. And I recognized the woman wearing it.

It was Molly, the homeless black woman who begs quarters outside Papa Joe's Deli. Like I said, Molly's thin, and the suit fit her perfectly. She even had the pillbox hat on top of her head.

She walked right by me as if I wasn't there!

"Hey." She didn't respond and I chased her down toward West End.

"Hey, Molly!"

She stopped short and twisted to peer at me. "I know you, dude. You that tax man always hassling me 'cause I ain't no 'real charity' or somethin'."

"How'd you like twenty bucks?"

She turned away. "I ain't no working girl," she said. "Tonight," she amended. "And twenty ain't no money for a trick."

"Oh!" She'd surprised me. "Not a trick. I want to buy your outfit."

She came right up to my face then. She laughed. "*'I want to buy your outfit,'* " she mimicked me. She pulled back. "You think I been born yesterday? You get me outta this 'outfit' then you want more. You men all alike."

She turned away again and marched off down the street. I hesitated and then ran after her.

"No. The dress, jacket, and hat. I'll give you two hundred dollars."

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She stopped cold. "Wowee! Now we talkin' money. Tell you what. John Derry come by and give me this outfit 'cause I got a job interview tomorrow. How about you give me a job, you get the outfit. That suit you, Mr. Tax Man?"

I tried to figure that one out.

"Two hundred dollars be here today, gone tomorrow. A job's a future. You know what I'm saying?"

She turned and walked away from me. I saw thousands of dollars disappearing in the dark.

"Wait, Molly, I'll give you a job."

She stopped again, walked back, and peered at me. "You joshing with me?"

"No." I swallowed and crossed my fingers. "No."

"How much you gon' pay me?"

"Five bucks an hour. I'll give you five dollars." She squinted at me as if she didn't believe me. "But not two hundred. One hundred dollars when you show up at nine tomorrow. But you have to bring the outfit. You can't wear it."

At nine sharp I was cutting the morning phlegm with a shot of Johnny Walker when Molly rang the bell. She was neatly dressed in clean jeans and a pullover. Jackie's outfit was folded but Molly clung to it until I'd given her the hundred bucks.

I looked it over and saw the outfit was somewhat worse for the street wear. It needed a quick dry cleaning. Molly's first task was to drop the outfit at the One Hour Fast Clean place on Broadway.

When she returned I could swear there was the faint scent of alcohol on her breath. But I'd had another medicinal round of Johnny Walker and it was hard for me to be sure. Molly presented me with the dry-cleaning receipt. It went into my pocket and, as I'd planned, Jackie's suit was nowhere in sight.

The "gang" showed up at nine-forty. Liz and her two sets of parents. I figured they'd made their own visit to the Salvation Army that morning. It wouldn't have been hard to figure out which Army outlet was closest to my home. To get her out of the way, I gave Molly ten bucks and told her to go get coffee and donuts for everyone.

Liz, looking ripe and delicious, started the ball rolling. "Okay, Harry, we hear there was a little break-in down at the Salvation Army during the night. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

I raised my eyebrows and tried to look as surprised as anyone.

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"Not me. I slept like a baby." I could tell no one believed me. I shrugged. "You want to take a look around, feel free."

I had to stop myself from laughing just thinking of the dry cleaner's slip in my shirt pocket.

"That would be juvenile of us, Harry. We don't need to act like you. We know you've got nothing without the letter. What is it you want?"

"Okay, you came here to get me to prepare and sign a tax return based on this charity deal. I'm still prepared to do that. I'll produce the outfit and prepare and sign the tax return. My fee is ten thousand dollars. End of story." Of course, I was thinking I wanted Liz in the sack as part of the deal, but I hoped it was an unstated assumption.

All the parents' eyebrows went up. But not Liz's.

"Okay," Liz said, "you got us. We agree. But we already made some down payments."

She made me produce the money, the check, and the credit-card receipt. Then Sammy Young Chung produced some more five-hundred-dollar bills. Liz let me count to ten thousand. She took it all and put it into an envelope which Mr. Chung stuck in his pocket.

"We'll hold that until we have the goods," Liz said.

"If that's the way you want to do business," I whined at her. But I had no choice and they followed me across 103rd Street to Broadway and into One Hour Fast Clean. I put the receipt on the counter, hoping Liz would spring for the bill. The Hispanic clerk came back with something on a hanger that he started to cover with a plastic bag.

"Just a moment," Liz said. She stepped up and looked carefully. "Harry, where's the jacket and the pillbox hat? This is just the dress."

I looked at her and at the Hispanic guy. "Where's the rest of it?"

He picked up the receipt. "That's all you guys give us. See. It says one dress." He held it and Liz and I crowded each other out trying to get a view. He was right—one dress.

Liz gave me a look that drilled a hole right through me. "Harry," she said, "I'm going to call you in one hour. You better know what's going on by then."

I ran all the way back to my office. Molly sat at my desk eating donuts and sipping Johnny Walker Black from the bottle.

I went right up to her and leaned down into her face. She did not flinch.

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"Molly, we have a problem."

"What's that?"

"The whole outfit did not end up at the cleaners."

She shrugged. "I couldn't see how you needed the whole outfit. I run into a real ol' buddy name of Betty from Central Park. I told her how this outfit got me a job. It was real good luck."

Molly stopped, took a bite from a glazed donut and a swig from the bottle. I glared at her but she didn't seem to mind.

"So?"

"I give Betty the jacket and hat. I figured you had 'nough with the rest of it."

"You gave it away. . . ." I was whining now. Thousands had disappeared.

" 'Sides, I figured my job here was over. I could see you just wanted the outfit."

"You're fired!" I screamed at her. She tried to take the Johnny Walker with her but I grabbed it out of her hand. She slammed the door as she went out.

I spent the next three days wandering around Central Park trying to find Betty. Lots of homeless people there knew her. But nobody had seen her since the fateful morning. The Feldsteins and Sammy Young Chung bothered me for the three days remaining in December, then, after January first, after it was too late to make the donation for that big tax year of Marc Feldstein's, I never heard from them again.

January third, I was coming out of Papa Joe's Deli when I ran into Molly out front. She was wearing Jackie's jacket but it had the buttons cut off and it was dirty and ripped beyond repair. The pillbox hat was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, Mr. Tax Man. I got your jacket here. You want it for a hundred bucks?"

I went home, polished off the bottle of Johnny Walker, and threw up.

Sure I took the two-hundred-dollar deduction for the Salvation Army receipt. It netted me about sixty bucks in tax savings.

Every time I see Molly, she looks the other way. Once when I passed I overheard her say sotto voce, "I never paid no taxes, and I ain't rich yet." ●

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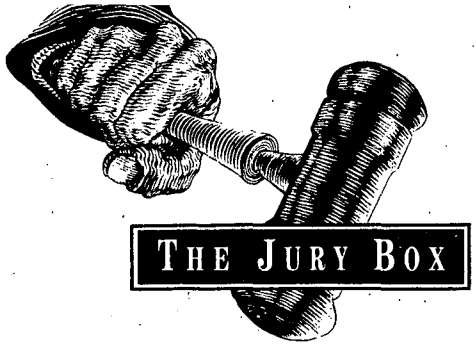

by Jon L. Breen

The term "novel of suspense" has been applied and misapplied profusely to all sorts of crime fiction since the forties, most appropriately to novels by Charlotte Armstrong, Evelyn Piper, Cornell Woolrich, and others whose prime goal was the creation of vicarious reader tension and uneasiness, sometimes though not always while throwing the whodunit element out the window. The latest from a perennial bestseller offers a prime example.

*** Dean Koontz: *Intensity*, Knopf, $25. With its known villain, claustrophobic atmosphere, and tension-packed 24-hour time frame, this is as pure a novel of suspense as you are likely to find. Twenty-six-year-old college student Chyna, haunted by demons from a miserable childhood, is the lone survivor of mass murder on a Napa Valley wine estate. She goes from trying to escape the nutty murderer to courageously going after him in the hope of saving another of his many victims.

*** Gayle Lynds: *Masquerade*, Doubleday, $23.95. This compelling novel of amnesia, CIA mendacity, and confused identities is a definitive example of another crime/suspense subgenre: the international pursuit thriller. Lynds, who has ghosted some books in the late Don Pendleton's Mack Bolan series and written juveniles as G. H. Stone, has the top thriller-writer's knack of juggling characters, locales, secrets, and surprises while making the pages almost turn themselves. (Accompanying publicity expresses the intent to make Lynds "the first bestselling female author of international suspense." Ever heard of Helen MacInnes or Evelyn Anthony?)

*** George Baxt: *The William*

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Powell and Myrna Loy Murder Case, St. Martin's, $20.95. In 1936, the news that a Hollywood madame's black book is on the market strikes fear into stars with morals clauses in their contracts. In a story as bright and alcoholic as a *Thin Man* movie, Baxt writes good dialogue for his stars and a supporting cast that includes Louis B. Mayer, Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, W. S. Van Dyke, and Jean Harlow. (Baxt hasn't entirely avoided anachronisms. Only longtime Southern Californians and racing buffs will note that there was no Hollywood Park until 1938, but surely the use of the sixties drug term "bummer" will jump out at many readers.)

*** William F. Nolan: *The Marble Orchard,* St. Martin's, $20.95. The second in the author's series about *Black Mask* writers Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Erle Stanley Gardner takes place in the same year and town as the Baxt novel above. This time Chandler is the central figure, looking into the alleged ritual Chinese suicide of his wife Cissie's first husband. The narrative style suggests but wisely doesn't try to duplicate that of a Philip Marlowe novel, and the complex plot hangs together a bit better than one of Chandler's. (In 1968, the terrific title, attributed to Al Capone, was listed as a forthcoming novel about Nolan's private eye Bart Challis. That Nolan finally gets to use it proves that we who never throw anything away, thinking we might need it someday, are right after all.)

** M. J. Rodgers: *Heart vs. Humbug,* Harlequin, $3.50. Appropriately-named developer Dole Scroogen wants to build a condo project while squeezing out the local senior citizens' center—protest and murder follow. The third novel about the Seattle law firm called Justice Inc. features some incredibly unnatural dialogue (see, for example, lawyer-heroine Octavia Osborne's description of the community center on page 46), and I feel sure the author would do better unencumbered by romance-novel conventions. Still, there's some inventive plotting and enjoyable legal legerdemain here, including a whodunit puzzle as good or better than a number of more prestigiously-published writers.

** Charles Meyer: *Blessed Are the Merciless,* Berkley, $5.50. Reverend Lucas Holt, Austin clergyman and leader of a team of ex-con crime fighters called the God Squad, appears for the second time, trying to ferret out the serial killer of some of his younger parishioners. There are some nice character touches here and there, including a sen-

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sitive treatment of old age, and the central plot device is certainly inventive, but the overlong and uneven novel includes some unconscionable misinformation about lesbians. None of the characters seem surprised at a gay relationship between two sisters (not impossible, I guess, but certainly improbable), and Holt and others make the uncontradicted assumption that lesbians are a high risk group for AIDS—actually, it's hard to imagine a population with a *lower* risk.

Following the lead of Bantam's successful reprinting (with celebrity introductions) of Rex Stout's mystery fiction, Dell has asked well-known mystery writers to introduce new readers to a sadly much shorter series, the Hoke Moseley novels of Charles Willeford, who died in 1988. Miami cop Moseley, with his dental and financial problems, distinctive conversational style, and human insights is one of the most likable and three-dimensional protagonists in the field, and his creator was among the best at depicting contemporary Florida. Reissued at $4.99 each are *Miami Blues* (1984), with an introduction by Jon A. Jackson, and *New Hope for the Dead* (1985), introduced by James Lee Burke. I hope the two other novels in the series will follow.

A sampling of Marvin Kaye's new anthology, *The Resurrected Holmes: New Cases from the Notes of John H. Watson* (St. Martin's, $24.95), suggests an excellent time for both Sherlockians and parody buffs. The premise is that a number of twentieth-century literary figures, among them Dreiser, Maugham, Hemingway, Wodehouse, and Lovecraft, were engaged to write unrecorded Holmes stories from Watson's notes. Thus, Richard A. Lupoff applies Jack Kerouac's long, rambling, comma-spliced sentences and self-indulgent wordplay to "The Adventure of the Boulevard Assassin," while Mike Resnick employs Thorne Smith's double entendres and farcical misunderstandings to "Mrs. Vamberry Takes a Trip," which also suggests one of Robert L. Fish's Schlock Homes parodies. William L. DeAndrea cleverly crosses Doyle and Spillane in "The Adventure of the Cripple Parade," while Edward D. Hoch challenges Holmes with a Queenian dying message (and numerous in-references for EQ buffs) in "The Manor House Case." Editor Kaye's own delightful contribution, "Too Many Stains," is ascribed to Rex Stout, retelling "The Adventure of the Second Stain" while casting Sherlock in the Archie Goodwin role to Mycroft's Nero Wolfe.

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Art by Ron Chironna

THE LADY AMONG THE TIGERS

by Kandis Elliot

Julianna San-Saens sat back on her bare brown heels in the darkness and contemplated the great curved teeth of the skulls. Hollow eye sockets, pooled in yellow light from her electric torch, returned eerie, flickering stares. Julianna was not a cowardly girl; in fact she was quite the brave child — Julianna the spelunker; Julianna the classroom biologist who touched frog intestines and sliced the cow's eyeball with her dissecting scalpel; Julianna who challenged even the bravest boys to explore the hills above Les Escaldes and follow her into cobwebbed, root-curtained caves. Julianna who at twelve regarded the traditional roles of Andorran women even in the modern 1950s as beneath contempt and who

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hoped, someday, to be a great scientist, or mathematician, or even a space-suited explorer of the Moon and stars.

Here she had been exploring the very opposite, an ancient, rimed cave like an *oo*-ing mouth, which she had found above a green little meadow, one hole among many in the Spain-facing slopes of the Pyrenees above her village. Boys had come and gone in the cave many times; their trash, graffiti, and attempts at sooty campfires marred the roomlike entryway, which was sunlit most of the day. Although Julianna dreamed of finding Visigoth earthenware, a boy's concept of human artifacts meant some souvenir of World War II, perhaps a bullet-dented helmet of a Nazi fleeing the Resistance, or, dare one hope, a live grenade. They'd found nothing but gritty rocks. No battles had been fought on their tiny republic's soil since 1278, when the feudal state of Andorra was placed under the joint rule of the Spanish bishop of Urgel and the French count of Foix. Disappointment, or perhaps the scarcity of torch batteries, had discouraged any further explorations of the limed passageways.

A mystery of paleoanthropology and a good old-fashioned murder mystery converge in Kandis Elliot's latest installment in the detecting adventures of University of Wisconsin zoologist Charles Farnsworth. The theme of Ms. Elliot's story is certainly original: Perhaps one of our readers will be able to tell us whether it's a first in the history of crime fiction. †

But Julianna, neither a quitter nor a coward, armed with a picnic basket, extra batteries, and a bale of string, all alone ventured the dark back passageways of the cave. If treasures of crystals and Roman coins were to be *easily* found, she'd reasoned, they already *would* have been found. Ergo, a young scientist would probe the darkness where mere boys feared to tread. Laying a trail of string, she'd made her way back exactly three thousand and ten steps when she was stopped by a pit thrice deeper than she was tall. Its circular reach at first seemed to extend back forever; then she saw her torchlight reflecting brightly from the vertical rear wall. She searched the rim for hand- and toeholds leading down into the pit. There were none. With darkness pressing ever more heavily

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around her, Julianna crouched on her heels and peered at the heaps of bones covering the pit's floor.

Bones and bones and more bones. Ribs and limb bones and pelvic blades and jumbled rows of vertebrae. And skulls, round-domed and long-snouted, armed with great long, curving fangs. "Bears," Julianna whispered reverently. "No, *tigers!*"

The girl knew that these beasts were dead, long dead, and so was whoever had strewn them there; she knew too that the cave had not crumbled in all the history of Andorra and would not choose that moment to do so no matter how it felt right now. Her father's good Swedish torch would not die, and even if it did she had fresh batteries, and even if *they* all went dead, she still had her string to lead her the three thousand and ten steps out. Furthermore, no one, not even bad boys, was right now cutting the string away somewhere behind her. So nothing was going to hurt her and she could spend long, scientific moments studying her find and contemplating whom she should tell about it, and, if she did, whether she would ever be allowed to see it again. All these reasonable musings coursed through her mind. So did a cold panic that threatened to send her howling back to the light of a living, ghostless world.

She held her ground with the same rational determination with which she'd pierced her cow's eyeball in science class when none of the other children would even touch theirs. She studied the tigers, many of them seeming to study her back, the deep black eye sockets of their bony faces fierce and angry. And then her circle of light landed on a profile which she knew at once to be human.

An age-browned skull, attached to a fairly well articulated human skeleton, lying prostrate with the triangular scapulas of its back uppermost, its long legs reposing atop tiger bones and its arms folded awkwardly beside its head, like a skeleton who had just wanted to lie down for a moment and take a nap, falling asleep even as it curled into a comfortable position.

And the torchlight did a funny thing, falling on the erstwhile human face in the pit at such an angle as to make the sleeper seem to wake—and look back at Julianna the explorer, who had disturbed such a very long repose. And that look, like a reflected echo of the sleeper's last living thoughts, reached through the eons to Julianna the little girl and sent her dashing from the cave, infused with a great wave of desolation.

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"It is a female Neanderthal, young, I should say only a few years post-puberty, and she was murdered."

Professor Charles D. Farnsworth tried to clear static from the computer's Internet phone-link while his other hand ran the mouse controlling his monitor's view of old — very old — bones, piled in a cave pit above a tourist town in a tiny republic nestled between France and Spain, half a planet away from his cramped campus office. Farnsworth knew without having to punch for magnification that those bones had lain in that pit long before Les Escaldes was a town, before Andorra nestled anywhere, even long before there was a France or a Spain. The air waves between his linkup and that of Sorbonne Professora San-Saens seemed just as distant. "Allo?" he said to the phone-link pickup. "Julianna, are you still there?"

Across the office, a stocky, ponytailed man balanced on a stepladder that precariously straddled the hips of a stuffed red kangaroo, complete with joey. "What's your guess, Doc?" The man's leathery brown face nodded toward the glowing Internet images. "Love or hate?" He batted dust from the top of a butterfly-crammed display cabinet. "I'd reckon hate's killed the most, but love's got plenty bloody hands."

Farnsworth murmured, "Mr. Gilcrist, if you please—"

"Allo?" said the voice from the computer speaker. "I am so sorry, Charley, I think I hear you say 'murdered' and then I do not know what to think."

"I did say 'murdered,' Julianna."

There was another pause. Farnsworth began to wonder if he were communicating with someone in the orbit of Jupiter instead of a Paris bastion of knowledge.

"Doc, tell your lady professor to go on back down in that pit and look around." Sam Bear Gilcrist descended two steps and began squeegeeing the butterfly-case glass. "The dead leave a message to the living. Especially if you do 'em wrong, then leave 'em without even saying words. Or giving 'em a little token to let the Great Spirit know who they are, that they was important to someone, once."

Farnsworth scowled toward the ladder, then at the computer. "Julianna," he said, "let me back up."

Earlier that morning, University of Wisconsin zoologist Charles D. Farnsworth had run out of desk space and had to put his

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mounted Andean condor on the floor, along with the jar containing the world's-record tapeworm—retrieved intact from the gut of a Bronx dieter who, while visiting the Orient, had purchased "Madame Chang's Miracle Skinny Pills," which were actually egg-filled proglottids. The jar's twelve-meter denizen had been the survivor of a war for *lebensraum* in the victim's three-meter gut.

Farnsworth had then refilled the entire surface of his massive oak desk with an upgrade to his new-last-month, dinosaured-this-month computer work station. He jumped through electronic hoops until rewarded with images from across the world of the pit of Les Escaldes, Andorra. As he'd been reviewing the collection of high-resolution images and short video clips, the biology building's custodian, wearing a checkered lumberjack shirt, colorful beaded headband, and a wet dusting of late-spring snow, banged into his office.

"Airport sent your boxes, Doc," the man announced. He wrestled a wire-strapped wooden crate through the door, looked in vain for floor space to stow it, then deposited it in the doorway. "You want I should start unpacking 'em?" He pointed to more crates still on a dolly in the hallway.

Farnsworth looked up from the computer. "I'll do that, Mr. Gilcrist—Good Lord, what happened to you?" He stared at a rick-rack line of stitches over the custodian's nose and between puffed, blackened eyes. The wound ended just short of the beaded headband.

"Pickets," came the disgusted reply. "Me 'n' a few boys from the tribe went spearfishing this weekend. Some people with rocks figgered I was being impolite." He removed work gloves and approached the computer-laden desk. "Whatcha got today, Doc? 'Nother new animal from Timbuk-too-land?"

Farnsworth raised a questioning eyebrow at the man. He knew that Wisconsin's Chippewa Indians had petitioned for, and received, a special limited season in which to indulge traditional fishing rituals. The situation caused no end of uproar among non-Indians, for reasons lost on Farnsworth. "You'll have to explain to me how a two-week Native American spring spearing season differs essentially from months-long summer and winter fishing seasons for non-Indians. Enough so for all that." He indicated the injury.

"Sure, Doc," the custodian replied. "And you bein' a Brit, you explain to me that IRA business, okay?" He peered at the com-

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puter image of a human skeleton draped over scattered bones. "Hmm. Bad karma."

"Actually, Neanderthal. Quite surprising, too. One would have expected Cro-Magnon, given the isotope date. Neanderthals were well on the road to extinction at this time. Cro-Magnon man eventually took over. That's you and me, Mr. Gilcrist. And the Irish thing is political, quite a different matter from fishing seasons. One should wonder why the *fish* don't protest. These things *are* regulated?"

Sam Bear Gilcrist gave the computer image a long perusal, then turned to his work. "Doc, some things are hard to regulate." He ascended his ladder, laden with wash-water bucket, spray bottles, and cleaning cloths, and attended to a twenty-foot-long papier-mâché mosasaur suspended from ceiling fluorescents. Gilcrist had been insisting for months on cleaning the admittedly much-neglected office. Farnsworth agreed to let him work during the spring break, when there was time to supervise him. The office was packed with irreplaceable specimens garnered on Farnsworth's many official trips as a zoological expert on rare, sometimes unique, species. Unfortunately, even one-of-a-kind treasures acted as powerful dust magnets. Even more unfortunately, first the transmissions from Julianna San-Saens, then the crates from the pit at Les Escaldes, had arrived amidst the cleaning chaos.

Farnsworth tended to the batting-stuffed crates, eventually lifting dark brown bones onto his Formica lab table. Three of the boxes contained sample leg bones and a few vertebrae, all, he recognized, from Paleolithic hoofed beasts: swine, bison, a femur from a Przewalski's horse. A fourth, smaller crate held an elongated skull with formidable curving canine teeth. The fifth crate contained a human skull.

"Fish and Game people send you more roadkill to identify?" asked the custodian from his perch. He then saw the human skull. "Another forensics job! What would them state guys do without the UW's smartest zoologist telling 'em what they got, hey, Doc?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Gilcrist." Farnsworth picked up the human skull. "These have been tentatively identified already. I'm merely providing verification for a friend." He pointed at the skull with the long canines. "That's a thirty-five-thousand-year-old pig. Of course, it would make your wild razorbacks seem like barnyard stock." A lower jawbone possessed equally formidable curved

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tusks. "Such dentition is used by modern wild swine mainly for social displays, but it can be as vicious as any wolf's."

Gilcrist's damp sponge paused between the mosasaur's webbed, clawed toes. "Whew," he whistled appreciatively. "And that fella you're holding, he got in a fight with the pig and they killed each other?"

Farnsworth turned the human skull in his hands. "She, actually," he said, peering. "I doubt that she killed any of these animals, but she probably helped to eat them. There's a plethora of butchering scrapes clearly visible on all these animal bones. They were dinner."

"Ah," came a soft acknowledgment from the ladder. "Those are the computer bad-karma bones."

"Mr. Gilcrist, I believe 'karma' is a Hindu concept."

"Whaddya want, 'bad spirits?' Chippewa got gambling casinos, indoor plumbing, modern slang. Sentiment's the same. Ain't you got a Druid word for it?"

"Any Druid genes I may claim," Farnsworth said, distracted, "are highly diluted." He gently flicked away curls of packing batting and examined the double-handful of features from humanity's past. Healthy teeth evidenced a slight malocclusion, an underbite; a ridge of bone eyebrowed the deep sockets. Later he would utilize precision measuring tools, but right now his eye made judgments that needed no objective data. He sized up the cuplike dent in the skull's left temple, framed with spidery cracks splintering away from the depression. The coin-sized hole at the bottom had, at the moment of its creation, once spewed shards that needled into the living brain, 35,000 years ago.

Farnsworth's fingers explored the dent, spanning the circumference this way and that. Abruptly his gaze was impelled to the array of animal bones from the crates. He picked up the Przewalski's horse femur. He held it like a club, giving it a few cautious swings. It had the heft and feel of a cricket bat. He then gently brought the ball of the femur to the deep, cup-shaped depression in the human skull.

A perfect fit.

"Bad karma, Doc."

"She was brained, Julianna." Charles D. Farnsworth zeroed in on the computer's image of the skull in the cave at Les Escaldes.

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"Which, by the way, gives her the dubious distinction of being the first known murder victim."

"Ah no, what do you say, Charley," said the sweetly accented voice from the phone-link, "there was Broken Hill Man, and the hanging victims from the acid bogs—"

"The bog bodies are hardly Paleolithic. Broken Hill Man died of rotten teeth which infected his ear and finally his cranium—God knows the man died in holy misery, but not at the hands of his fellow *Homo erectus*. And no other late-hominid fossil remains reveal any conclusive cause of death, not even the complete burials. Your pit girl is, by default, the earliest verifiable homicide." The skull now sat next to the computer monitor, which displayed the cave at Les Escaldes as it had been before the few sample specimens were removed. Farnsworth found himself searching for some tangible clue as to why this individual ended up with animals in such a common grave. It wasn't the act itself that germinated a touch of sad melancholy in his heart, but the existence of hard evidence for an old killer nature in man, genetic, deep-rooted, and eternal. The communication lag between his phone and that of Professora San-Saens seemed just as eternal.

"But Charley, she may only have fallen in that pit, or had an accident—"

"Doc, tell her to look for a reason in the bones." Sam Bear had descended halfway down the ladder to dust marblelike beetles. "The dead don't let it go."

Farnsworth half-turned. "Mister Gil—"

"—or there must be a hundred ways she gets into the pit," continued the Internet voice. "Why, it could have been myself. What if I fall in when I first come upon the pit? And now you say—"

"Doc, I can help you figger why she was murdered."

"*You'll* help me—" Farnsworth frowned at the custodian's soft interruptions, hoping Julianna wasn't picking them up. He automatically focused on the stitched cut between the Indian's eyes. "I *know* how she was murdered."

"Didn't say 'how.' Said 'why.'"

Farnsworth pulled his attention back to the computer. "It was easy to deduce the cause of death, Julianna," he explained. "It's been fairly well documented for prey animals of hominids, if not the hominids themselves. I believe Leaky first showed that baboons found among Australopithecine remains had all died of depressed skull fractures, and in fact were lying among the mur-

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der weapons: femurs of African antelopes. Even more interesting, the baboons' head injuries were all on the left side, indicating that the killers were right-handed. Same thing with whoever bashed your pit girl. Right-handedness of a sort runs through the animal kingdom, you know."

"Ai," sighed the soft voice from the Internet. "So someone beat upon the head my poor Les Escaldes girl. Cannibalism, do you think?"

"I don't believe she was killed to be eaten like the pigs," Farnsworth said. "Are you looking at the video images now?"

"Yes, but I remember the pit exactly. It has not changed since first I saw it as a girl." She laughed quietly. "Between you and myself, Charley, I had thought all of the pigs with their long teeth to be tigers!"

He was sorely tempted to scold her for having waited so long to reveal the site even to the scholarly community. When they'd been colleagues at Oxford several years ago, she'd confessed to having once seen remarkable fossils in a cave above her home village; how she'd been so afraid scientists would steal it from her that she'd waited to become a scientist herself before showing it to the world. But by then she was fearful of condemnation for having hoarded the secret. Farnsworth pointed out that the cave had waited tens of thousands of years, a few more wouldn't make any difference, and that Julianna needn't feel any obligation to reveal her childhood adventures. In confidence, just three months ago, Sorbonne Professora Julianna San-Saens had told him of "discovering" a remarkable fossil bed in a small cave in the Pyrenees. So far, she had disturbed it only to hook out the specimens he had suggested for dating and identifying.

"This scan of the pit," Farnsworth tapped at the monitor, "indicates that the animal bones were disarticulated before they were tossed in. I believe I see some even cracked for the marrow."

"Yes, I, too, concluded that this pit was the garbage dump," Julianna confirmed. "Paleolithic Europe had ten-feet-tall bears and packs of dire wolves—and cavemen neighbors! Better to hide the offal than to call attention to one's ongoing feast. Ai," she sighed again, "how they lived! With *that* in their pantry!"

"Now," Sam Bear Gilcrist mused over a robin's-egg-blue beetle, "we dump our garbage in the ocean. Much advanced."

"Early Man," Farnsworth said to the phone-link pickup, "lived just as we would today, had we fewer technological comforts. Only

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a few generations ago Sawney Beane lived quite well in almost these same circums—"

The phone-link crackled. "Sawney Beane! That cannibal Englishman? Was that not a myth?"

Farnsworth cleared his throat loudly. "Sawney Beane, the *Scot,* his wife, children, and inbred grandchildren stalked rich lords on holiday in the moors. The Beanes utilized their catch as a dietary staple and were found living among pits of human flesh and bones."

"I'll bet Sawney didn't brain young girls for long pig, though." The soft comment crept in the background.

Farnsworth refused to be interrupted. "When the clan was finally hunted down, the pursuers fainted from the stench, the perfume of home to the Beanes. The so-called 'civilized' retribution included sawing the Beane men to pieces and burning their women and children to death on a slow fire."

"Whaddya know. Guess the English ain't a kinder or gentler race either, eh, Doc?"

Farnsworth clamped the pickup. "Beane was a *Scot,"* he hissed.

The Internet voice prevented further retorts. "Barbarians, all! Charley, I am ill. Humans have de-evolved since my Les Escaldes girl. Did you read of the nine Neanderthalers discovered near Shanidar? One had an amputated and *healed* right arm. They knew surgery with stone tools. They buried their dead with flowers—we can tell what time of year by the kinds of pollen grains sprinkled over the bones. Not barbaric at all. And you tell me they lived like—like Scotsmen!"

"Nobody wants to say they were even the same species as the Cro-Magnon who replaced them. But I suspect some behaviors were indistinguishable. This may be the first recorded murder, but it certainly wasn't the last."

"Doc. Tell 'er about ol' Ed Gein. Made vests out of women's skins. Tits and all. And this Jeffy Dahmer down in Milwaukee, whackin' on faggots and boiling their—"

"Mr. Gilcrist, wouldn't you agree that your fishing experience warrants a rest day at home?"

The custodian glanced up briefly before selecting a Dustbuster from the ladder's suspended bag of equipment. "One of those Cro-Magnons like you 'n' me bashed her, right, Doc? That's why they went extinct." He flicked on the little vacuum and started running it over the kangaroo and her joey.

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The computer image and the voice connection abruptly shut down.

"Turn that bloody thing off!" Farnsworth jumped to reestablish satellite connections with the Internet again. "And Cro-Magnons didn't make a crusade of killing Neanderthals, Mr. Gilcrist. There's quite a few adherents to the school of thought that the species simply merged by interbreeding. There are many skeletal finds where the individuals run the range of one type through the other."

"Well, that's another way to do it," Sam Bear said, substituting his pocket comb for the vacuum.

"Do *what?* Damn this infernal interface—"

"Get rid of 'em."

"Of—?"

"Neanderthals. If you don't keep the races pure, how the hell you gonna tell 'em apart?"

Farnsworth finally reestablished the connection. After apologies and explanations to Julianna, he couldn't quite remember where his conversation with her had broken off.

Julianna reminded him. "It was a lover's quarrel."

Farnsworth blinked at the phone-link pickup. "What?"

"Why she was murdered and left without burial, Charley." Julianna sounded adamant. "She was not a cannibal barbarian. I could feel it when I first see her. A great sadness."

Sam Bear nodded. "Now she's on track."

Farnsworth rubbed his eyes. "Julianna, I really don't want to speculate overly on the circumstances of your Les Escaldes girl. All I can infer is that she was the last to get tossed in the pit. She lies facedown over parts of ten different skeletons that I can see from your images, possibly more, but no remains were cast over *her*. Your next task is to get down in that pit and start going over it bone by bone, in an orderly context—"

"The murderer was appalled at his dreadful deed." Julianna had no qualms about speculation. "And closed up the pit out of conscience. Or he was fearful of being found out and brought to Neanderthal justice. I hope he was sawed to pieces and burned over a slow fire."

"Why do you think the perpetrator was a he?" Farnsworth countered.

"I'd bet it was, too." Sam Bear neatly combed a part in the kangaroo's head fur.

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"*Mister* Gilcrist—"

"Men kill women," Julianna replied, "not the other way around. We are always the prey animals."

"Julianna, *women* fight!" Farnsworth at once recognized how easily he'd been yanked into the ridiculous argument. Terrible to go soft in the head, he thought. For a moment he considered that Julianna herself was likely a direct descendant of the peoples who had lived near, and possibly with, the girl in the pit. "Maybe she was fooling around with another woman's lover."

"Humf! And if so, then she and her rival pull a little hair. Not pick up a horse leg and bash in the skull."

"Tell her again, Doc. Get down in there and hear what the victim has to say."

Farnsworth, exasperated, twisted to the custodian with a reprimand ready to fly. Instead he caught Gilcrist's steady, earnest gaze dead on him. Then an idea bloomed in the back of his mind and without a word to Sam Bear Gilcrist, he turned back to the computer. "Julianna," Farnsworth said, "go back to Les Escaldes and check your pit girl *very* carefully."

"What am I expecting to find?"

"A possible motive for murder."

"Politeness," added Sam Bear Gilcrist, when the Sorbonne connection had been broken.

Farnsworth, still hearing Julianna's last accented lament as to man's unfairness to womanhood, turned to him. "All right, Mr. Gilcrist. Out with whatever you've been trying to say."

"Why a Neanderthal girl can end up on a Cro-Magnon bone pile. Not being polite."

"Politeness. Right. I believe you've just been treating me to a great deal of *im*politeness, thank you very much."

Gilcrist gave the kangaroo a pat. "Doc, there's something you gotta understand." He sat down on a ladder rung and looked at his hands a moment. "This day and age, it ain't political to have nothing but politeness up the wazoo. That's what guys like you, foreigners an' all, are supposed to see. You think it ain't the way it was, when Missus Lucille Brown walked into the corner grocery, where she knew she could go, and it's 'Hi, Miz Lucy, how yawl doing these days, rumatiz acting up,' and so on and so on, real polite and decent. But nineteen twenty or this morning, don't

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think Miz Lucy goes home anywhere but back to the local tar town, and mom 'n' pop grocer go home to the white folks' section."

"Oh come now. That's dreadfully hackneyed. Why, we—"

"Ain't talkin' real estate. It's *place*. Tar town. Frog town. Bone piles."

Bloody wogs. The phrase walked into Farnsworth's mind very softly, all too easily.

"Yer gettin' it, Doc. Here, you see stuff and hear stuff, whites throwin' stones and callin' woods-nigger. I mean, that's petty, and sure, it's ugly. But hell, a whole lotta Indian kids got white moms or dads. You take your real race hatred now, it don't have that face. That face is polite. One kind's guy knocks up another kind's girl, why, then they got more rules that ain't so polite. Not real long ago they'd get the guy, nail his balls to a stump, hand him a knife, and then they'd set the stump on fire. They punched the girl in the guts till she wasn't pregnant no more. Only the nails and the stumps change. *Your* kind can live among *our* kind, but you gotta obey the rules. See what I mean, Doc? You can *be* polite. You can fish when they say. You can even know surgery with stone tools."

Farnsworth stared silently for another moment. "Mr. Gilcrist," he said slowly, "I have never known you to make racist comments."

"Doc, it ain't me. I said I'd help you out here."

Several days passed, long enough for Charles D. Farnsworth to examine all the Les Escaldes images down to the last pixel, when Julianna San-Saens sent a fax telling him to expect a new batch of images and to connect for voice transmission.

"Charley, you have the instincts of the inspector general! Under my poor pit girl was the skeleton of her baby. A perfect third-trimester fetus, even some of the skin mummified. And Charley, it shows Cro-Magnon features. And again, I look even closer, as you suggest. And I find pollen. Lupines from the hillside, and she had been covered with them, and they had been picked in spring and their pollen fuses with the fetus beneath her. Through her bones, the flowers fell, when someone remembered her still."

Much later, computer screen blank, alone in his trim and tidy office—or at least the sole human occupant, the multitude of living things in small glass prisons all coming to hopeful attention whenever he paced near their food containers—Charles D.

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Farnsworth slowly navigated the crowded floor and wondered. Two murders. The murderer unknown, possibly a mate. Or family member. But most likely male, he agreed with Julianna there.

Perhaps she had broken a tribal taboo. Or was a thief caught in the act. But killed just as she was becoming obviously, unhideably, pregnant. She had been either a consort or a rape victim of those who would replace her kind. She had died in secrecy, or perhaps in disgrace, either case denying her tribal burial rituals. Yet long after the brutal act, someone had snuck back to cover her decomposing memory with flowers. Flowers that told the Great Spirit, if no one else, that she had been important to someone, once.

Farnsworth did not need to turn the computer on to bring back the face of the Les Escaldes pit Neanderthal. He could, in his mind, even clothe that skull with flesh and skin and features. Face of a lover, he considered. Truly loving, not simply polite—who had truly loved despite racial and cultural, even species barriers. How great a difference does it take before hate is the only possible emotion? Could the most delicate measures possibly determine the slightest racial distinctions between Irish Protestants and Catholics? Genocide or interbreeding: One or the other had pushed Neanderthals from the face of the Earth. Perhaps it was the tolerant hearts who had loved an entire genotype to extinction.

The conscience of a lover, not a murderer, would fill the grave of a long-dead corpse with flowers. ●

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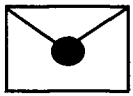

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A Parliament of Peacocks

by Edward D. Hoch

Every autumn since it was first convened twenty years ago, the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention has found a home in a city of North America or Britain whose mystery fans are sufficiently dedicated to undertake the gargantuan task of organizing the convention. In 1995, Nottingham, England was the gracious host city. To England, therefore, flocked many of the field's top authors, including Ed Hoch, who has turned his experiences into a short story.

Susan Holt was dining with two executives from Harrods department store, at one of London's most fashionable restaurants. The appetizer was delicious and the music sublime. She was enjoying the stimulating conversation about the world of international retailing, and only wished she could stop yawning.

The middle-aged man seated next to her, a store manager from Istanbul, had joined their party at the last minute. He smiled sympathetically and said in a low voice, "Did you fly in last night from New York?"

"How did you guess?"

"You'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

His name was Abidine Tekin, and his silvery hair and moustache gave him the appearance of an exotic movie star. She guessed him to be in his mid forties, and, like herself, he was in London to learn the techniques Harrods and other stores used for their promotions.

"We are much impressed by the way you handle these things at Mayfield's," one of the Harrods people was saying to her, yanking

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her mind back to the business at hand. "Was yours the first store in Manhattan to use a fully painted city bus to carry your advertising message?"

"Mayfield's was the first department store. The technique had been used previously to promote a TV series and individual products."

The restaurant was located on the top floor of one of the city's newer hotels, the Princess of Wales. Its windows commanded a breathtaking view of London by night, with tables running along three walls. The fourth wall, backing up to the kitchen, was given over to a small bandstand where a quartet of piano, drums, bass fiddle, and saxophone played show tunes and songs from the sixties while a young blond singer named Yolanda filled the room with her strong but subtle voice.

Susan guessed her to be around thirty, with a slender figure that showed to effect beneath her blue satin gown. Straight blond hair, ending just above her shoulders, fell in front of her face as she sang, with the microphone held almost to her lips. She was not really attractive, but her voice gave her a certain charm.

The group played for almost an hour, then took a fifteen-minute break while Susan's party waited for its main course. It seemed the perfect opportunity to slip off to the ladies' room and Susan did just that. "Hurry back," Abidine Tekin urged, obviously enjoying her company more than that of the Harrods executives.

Susan glanced at her watch and subtracted the five-hour time difference with New York City. It would be five o'clock there now and her boyfriend Russell should be at their apartment. She'd promised to phone if she had an opportunity. When she left the ladies' room she slipped into one of the glass-enclosed booths and inserted her phone card in the slot. Almost at once she heard a woman's voice from the booth to her right and realized that the soundproofing was none too good.

"I got your page. What is it? I'm working."

Susan Holt recognized the blue dress and blond hair. It was the singer, Yolanda, on her break. After listening for a moment she continued, "No, I told you last time I was out of the business. I'm singing regularly now. I don't need anything else." Another brief silence and then, "I know the money is good, but I'm steering clear of the peacocks. It's too dangerous."

Under ordinary circumstances Susan would never have eavesdropped on a private conversation, but she'd just heard the woman singing and was fascinated by this sudden revelation of her private self. Then, as if sensing she might be overheard, Yolanda

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dropped her voice and the rest of the conversation was lost.

Susan quickly dialed her Manhattan number and was disappointed when she got the answering machine. She left a brief message for Russell and then returned to her table. The three men politely stood up as she slid into her chair. "Does Mayfield's have dining facilities on the premises?" one of the men asked.

"We have a coffee shop in the basement, near the entrance to the subway—"

"She means the underground," the Turk translated for the Harrods people, a bit to Susan's annoyance.

"—and a larger restaurant upstairs that serves beer and wine."

The older of the two Englishmen nodded. "We find customers linger longer if there is some nourishment available."

Susan was quick to agree. "In the States even large bookstores and some libraries now have coffee bars and cafes."

Their main courses arrived as the music resumed with a lively rendition of "The Girl from Ipanema." Susan remembered from her previous London trip that it was a perennial favorite in restaurants and clubs. They were finishing dessert after a leisurely meal when the band took its eleven o'clock break.

As one of the Harrods executives was paying the check, Abidine Tekin smiled and invited her for an after-dinner drink. "I'm afraid I couldn't keep my eyes open another ten minutes," Susan answered honestly. "Perhaps another time."

"How long will you be here?"

The waiter arrived with a long-stemmed rose for Susan, the only woman in the party. She took it and said, "Just three days. I fly back to New York on Friday."

Abidine smiled. "Perhaps I will phone your hotel."

The singer Yolanda was wearing a glittery gold gown as the band began its final set. Susan gave the Turkish gentleman a smile without really answering, then followed the others toward the elevator. But Abidine was persistent. "Which hotel are you at?"

She glanced at her watch and saw that it was 11:30. Tired as she was, it might be better to have a drink with the man now than be pestered with calls for three days. "May I change my mind about that drink?" she asked. "It would have to be a quick one."

His smile broadened. "We can stop in the lobby." He excused himself to go to the men's room, meeting her five minutes later at the dimly lit lobby bar.

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They spent a pleasant hour over liqueurs, discussing their dinner hosts and the city in general. "They are so geared to the international community," Susan observed, sipping her drink. "Harrods even has machines for currency exchange, right in the store! You put in your dollars or francs or marks and the correct number of pounds is delivered automatically."

"At a small profit, I'm sure." He lit a dark Turkish cigarette and offered her one but she declined. "You don't smoke?"

"I stopped a few years ago."

"Married, engaged?"

She held up the bare fingers of her left hand. "There is a boyfriend, though, back in New York. We live together off and on."

Abidine brushed at the tip of his moustache as if curling it like an old rogue. "London can be a very romantic city."

"I thought that was Paris. Sorry, Abidine, but it's time I said good night before I fall asleep."

"Surely I can walk you back to your hotel."

She gave him a tired smile. "That won't be necessary. It's only a block away." She rose and held out her hand. "Thank you for the drink. Perhaps we'll see each other again at Marks & Spencer or one of the other stores."

He knew enough not to press it. "I certainly hope so."

Susan left him there in the lobby bar and hurried outside. It was shortly after midnight and a light drizzle had set the streets glowing with reflected light. She was staying at the Grosvenor House, more than a block away but not far. As she circled around the rear of the Princess of Wales she heard a sound like a muffled scream. A short man with close-cropped white hair was tussling with a woman against the wall of the hotel. His right hand came up and Susan saw the blade of a knife catch the glow of a street light. Suddenly she was wide awake and running toward them, unmindful of the danger.

"Let her go!" she shouted. "Help! Police!"

Susan grabbed for the man's upraised arm, yanking it away from the woman. He dropped the knife and broke free, dashing away down the slick narrow street. Only then did she turn toward the woman and realize for the first time that it was Yolanda, the singer from the restaurant upstairs.

"Not the police," the woman sobbed. "Don't call them."

Susan retrieved the fallen jackknife, snapped it shut, and dropped it into her raincoat pocket without thinking. She tried to

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help Yolanda to a taxi, but the woman was trembling with fear. "Where do you live?" she asked. "I'll take you home."

"N-no! He'll be waiting there too!"

"Who will?" When she didn't answer, Susan asked, "What about your musicians? Can one of them help?"

The woman looked up through her tears. "You know me?"

"I was upstairs for dinner. I heard you sing. Who's trying to kill you?"

But Yolanda only shook her head. "It doesn't concern you."

"It does now," Susan told her. She introduced herself and explained that she was in London on business. "You can't go home and I certainly can't leave you in the street. You can spend the night in my hotel room. I've an extra bed that's not being used."

"No—"

"It's that or I call the police. Take your choice."

"Not the police," she said again.

Susan hurried her along the narrow street until they reached the courtyard that was the hotel's entrance. Once safely in the room, Yolanda began to relax for the first time. Her makeup was streaked and tears had washed the mascara from her eyelids. "He was trying to cut my face," she told Susan.

"Do you know him?"

She nodded. "They call him Cargo. He used to be a merchant seaman."

"Why would he want to injure you?"

Yolanda fell silent. After a moment she asked, "Do you have anything to drink?"

Susan glanced around the room. "I suppose there's something in the minibar. I haven't really looked." She opened the small refrigerator and glanced inside. "Here we go—whiskey, gin, vodka. Also beer and soft drinks. And champagne!"

"A whiskey and water will do nicely, thanks."

Susan didn't think she could handle one herself and chose a Coke instead. "Now tell me what this is all about."

"It's nothing you want to hear. I appreciate your coming to my rescue like that and offering me a bed for the night, but I can't involve you in my troubles." For the first time Susan caught a touch of an accent in her voice. It wasn't British but she couldn't quite place it.

"Are you American?" she asked.

"I was brought up in New York, but my parents are Spanish. I use Yolanda as my stage name but my full name is Yolanda Delgado."

Aware that she was getting herself more deeply involved than

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might be wise, Susan said, "I have to tell you I overheard part of a telephone call you made during your ten o'clock break. I was in the next booth, calling New York. I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

The young woman seemed startled. "What did you hear?"

Susan shrugged. "Some business about peacocks. You were refusing to do something for the person on the other end."

The singer shook her head as if to clear it of memories. "I did some foolish things when I first came to London. I needed the money but that's no excuse."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I was just calling back someone who'd paged me. He offered me a job but I turned it down."

"You wear a pager while you're singing?"

Yolanda lifted her skirt and revealed a small plastic box strapped to her thigh. "It doesn't beep. It just vibrates against my skin. Then when I get a chance I return the call."

Susan determined not to press her. She didn't want to know any more. "I have to get to sleep, and I'll probably sleep late in the morning. If you have to leave, just let yourself out."

"Thank you. You're very kind."

Susan went into the bathroom to undress, leaving the door partly open. In the mirror she saw Yolanda dip her right hand into her purse for a pen and write a few words on a slip of paper. She came out wearing a robe and offered an extra nightgown to the singer. "I think we're about the same size. This should fit you."

While Yolanda was undressing in the bathroom, Susan's curiosity got the better of her and she peeked into the woman's purse to see what she had written. There was a loose sheet of Princess of Wales notepaper with *Y 11* written in purple ink, and then Susan's name and room number in black ink.

She awoke from a dreamless sleep feeling refreshed. There was sunlight visible at the edges of the drapes and she knew it was late. Rolling over to look at her watch on the bedside table, she saw that it was nearly eleven o'clock. She'd made up nicely for that missed night's sleep on the plane coming over.

Suddenly Susan remembered the previous night's adventure and sat up, staring at the other bed. It was empty and unmade, though the sheets and blankets had been straightened somewhat. In the bathroom she found her nightgown, washed out and hung up to dry. A note on the sink said simply, "Thank you for saving my life!" It was unsigned.

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Luckily Susan had left the morning free to recover from her trip. Her first appointment wasn't till after lunch. She'd have something to eat at the hotel and walk around London for a bit. At least with the sun shining she wouldn't need her raincoat. It was at a newsstand on Piccadilly an hour later that she saw the headline on an afternoon tabloid: Gov't Aide Slain in Hotel Love Nest.

She was not a reader of tabloid journalism and would have ignored it except for the photograph of the Princess of Wales Hotel beneath the headline. She bought a paper and skimmed the article. A young parliamentary aide named Jonathan Ellis had been found stabbed to death in a room at the hotel. Indications were that the room was being used for some sort of sexual activity and the leadership of the House of Commons was already taking steps to hush up the affair. The body of Ellis, married but separated from his wife, had been found by the chambermaid around nine that morning. The condition of the body and a broken wristwatch the victim was wearing placed the time of death around eleven-thirty the previous night. The murder weapon had not been found.

Suddenly Susan Holt remembered the knife she'd picked up in the street after knocking it from the hand of Yolanda's attacker. What time had that been? After midnight, surely. Yolanda's group had returned for their final set at eleven-fifteen, just as her party was leaving. She'd stopped for a drink in the lobby bar with Abidine and been there about an hour. She must have left the hotel around twelve-fifteen and come upon that man Cargo attacking Yolanda. That timing made sense, because the band's final set would have ended at midnight or a few minutes after. If Cargo had stabbed this man Ellis at eleven-thirty, he could have gotten downstairs and waited for Yolanda to emerge from the hotel forty-five minutes later.

And the murder weapon might be resting in Susan's raincoat pocket back in her hotel room.

She found a phone booth and called her contact at Marks & Spencer to postpone her two o'clock appointment until the following morning. Then she took a taxi back to her hotel. She wanted to make certain the knife was still in her coat before phoning the police. It was. She handled it with a handkerchief to avoid smudging fingerprints more than she already had. Placing it on the desk by the telephone, she called Scotland Yard and asked for the detective assigned to the Ellis killing. She gave her name and said she might have information about the murder weapon.

After much switching around, a deep masculine voice identify-

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ing itself as Inspector Cheever came on the line. "You're calling about the murder at the Princess of Wales Hotel, Miss Holt?"

"That's correct. Around twelve-fifteen this morning I witnessed a knife attack on a young woman outside the Princess of Wales. The man ran away but he dropped his knife and I picked it up. I have it here in my hotel room."

"Was the attack reported to the police?"

"No. The young woman was uninjured and she did not wish to report it."

"And where is your room?"

"The Grosvenor House, Room Three fifty-nine."

"Please remain in your room, Miss. Someone will be there shortly."

"Thank you." She hung up and sat staring at the knife, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

There was a knock at the door ten minutes later but it wasn't the police. A bellman was delivering a vase of flowers. Susan's first thought was Abidine, but they were from Yolanda. The note read simply: "Thank you again! Yolanda." She placed the vase on a table near the window, remembering that the singer had noted her name and room number.

The next knock at the door was indeed the police, in the person of Inspector Cheever himself, accompanied by a woman constable. "Here's the knife," Susan said.

The constable handled the weapon carefully, placing it in an evidence bag. Then she took out a small tape recorder and, with Susan's permission, began recording the conversation. "Did you close the blade?" Cheever asked. He was a gray-haired man with cold blue eyes and a square jaw, not at all friendly.

"I'm afraid so," Susan admitted. "I wasn't thinking."

"Don't worry. This may not be the murder weapon. But I need to know exactly what happened outside the hotel last night."

She recounted it in detail, beginning with her business dinner at the hotel. The only things she left out were the overheard telephone conversation and Yolanda's beeper. "She knew this man who attacked her?" Cheever asked, making a note of the singer's name.

Susan nodded. "She said he was called 'Cargo.' It was a nickname because he'd been a merchant seaman. Was this man Ellis killed with a similar knife?"

"We don't know. The preliminary autopsy report indicates the stab wounds were inflicted by a left-handed killer who took the weapon with him." He glanced around the room.

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"Yolanda Delgado stayed here overnight?"

"She was afraid to return to her apartment. She sent these flowers to thank me."

He walked over to the flowers and examined the card. "She's a singer at the Princess of Wales Hotel?"

"At the roof restaurant."

"Had you ever seen her before last night?"

"No."

He went over her story in more detail and said they'd probably want to speak with her again. "How long will you be in the country?"

"I fly back on Friday."

Inspector Cheever got to his feet. "I hope we won't need to delay your return, Miss Holt. I'll be in touch."

"I know nothing more than I've told you."

"This killing might have far-reaching implications. Crimes involving government officials are always messy in this country, especially when the tabloids start talking of love nests. I hope you won't add to the clamor by speaking with the press."

She assured him she had no intention of doing so, but he left her wondering if she'd done the wisest thing by calling the police. Suddenly it became very important that she speak to Yolanda again before the inspector got to her. She phoned the dining room at the Princess of Wales and asked how she might contact the singer.

"The band plays from seven till midnight," a bored woman responded. "You can see her then."

"No, I mean now—this afternoon. What's her home number?"

"I'm sorry. We don't give out that information."

Susan hung up, certain they'd have given it out to Inspector Cheever. Then she remembered the vase of flowers. The card with Yolanda's message also bore the name of the florist. The address was in Chelsea, probably a neighborhood place near where she lived. Susan decided to go there rather than call.

She took a taxi from the front of her hotel and reached the florist shop shortly after three o'clock. The woman clerk was friendly and chatted while she arranged fresh flowers in a basket. "The vase to Grosvenor House? Certainly I remember it. Did the order myself, just this morning."

"I want to call Yolanda and thank her but I've mislaid her number. Would you happen to have it?"

"Don't have her phone number but we have her billing address in the files. She's a regular customer."

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"That would be fine," Susan assured her.

The address proved to be on Old Church Street, two blocks away.

She walked up to the second-floor apartment and rang the bell, somehow confident that Yolanda would answer. Of course she didn't. If she was in there, she wasn't about to admit it.

Susan went back downstairs. The building had once been a private house, converted to apartments sometime in the distant past. Hallways led off the main corridor toward rooms in the back. As she walked past one of them, a hand shot out to grab her.

It was Yolanda.

"You gave me a fright," Susan told her, recovering from the verge of a scream.

"Never mind that. What are you doing here?"

"We have to talk. There was a murder at the Princess of Wales Hotel last night."

"I saw the papers," the woman said. "How did you find me?"

"Through your florist. Thanks for the flowers."

"What are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I still had the knife Cargo used to attack you. I called the police and told them about it. Maybe Cargo killed that man Ellis."

"Come in here," Yolanda ordered, grasping Susan's arm as she propelled her down the side corridor and into a room. She closed and locked the door behind them.

Susan glanced around, seeing a modestly decorated flat with inexpensive furniture. "I thought you lived upstairs."

"That's an apartment I maintain for entertaining. I like to stay down here when I'm trying to avoid people."

"Like Cargo?"

"Him and others." She lit a cigarette. Susan had noticed that more people smoked over here than at home. "What did you tell the police?"

"That he tried to attack you with the knife and maybe it was the same weapon used in the murder."

Yolanda looked unhappy. "They'll come looking for me, nosing around."

"Maybe that'll keep Cargo away. You've got nothing to hide, have you?"

She gave a snort. "Everyone's got something to hide. Before I started getting regular singing jobs I worked for an escort service. Cargo was my boss."

Susan simply stared at her. "You mean he was your pimp."

"I don't like that word, but I suppose it's true."

"That was Cargo on the phone with you last night, wasn't it?"

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She ground out her cigarette in the ashtray and gave a reluctant nod. "He wanted me for a special client. I refused to go. I told him I had a good singing job and I was out of the game."

"I overheard you say *peacocks.*"

"You have good ears." She started to smile but then her face grew somber, as if she was remembering something better left forgotten. "They called it the Peacock Parliament because many of them were young parliamentary aides. Some of the girls said members of Parliament themselves sometimes took part, but one could never be sure. They all wore these fancy masks made of peacock feathers so we could never see their faces. We'd pair off and go to separate rooms. Sometimes one of the members would request a favorite girl."

"That's what happened last night?"

Yolanda nodded. "Cargo rang my beeper and when I called back he said I'd been requested by one of the Peacocks. I told him no, that I wasn't doing it anymore. He said I'd be sorry, that he'd cut my face. I didn't believe him then."

"Was Jonathan Ellis one of the Peacocks?"

"I never knew any of their names."

"His picture was in the afternoon papers."

"I told you we didn't see their faces."

"Not even by accident?"

"Sometimes, sure. But I didn't know him."

"He was the one who was stabbed at the hotel. Cargo might have killed him and then come after you."

She shook her head. "Cargo would never kill a cash customer."

"But he'll probably come after you again."

Yolanda opened her purse to show Susan a silver-plated .25 caliber automatic. It had a pink pearl handle. "I'll be carrying this with me now. I call it my ladygun."

They both tensed at the sound of footsteps on the stairs to the upper floor. "Police," Susan guessed. "Is there a back way out of here?"

"This way."

At the door Susan paused. "Will you be singing tonight?"

Yolanda gave her a smile. "If I'm alive."

When Susan returned to her hotel she was surprised to find Abidine Tekin waiting for her. "What are you doing here, Abidine? How did you find me?" She seemed to be echoing Yolanda's words to her.

"The people at Marks & Spencer knew where you were staying.

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When you postponed your appointment I thought you might be ill."

"No, I'm fine. I just had some business to tend to."

"There was a murder at the hotel where we dined last night."

Susan nodded. "I read about it."

"It seems to be causing quite a scandal." He glanced at his watch. "Are you free for dinner tonight?"

"I—" She really didn't want to become involved with this Turkish gentleman who no doubt collected women on every business trip. Still, she could take care of herself. And she wanted to make certain Yolanda could too. "You know, this sounds crazy with all the restaurants in the city, but I wouldn't mind going back to the top of the Princess of Wales again. The food was fine, the music was pleasant, and I'd like to really enjoy it without the pressure of a business dinner."

"I agree completely. Shall we make it eight o'clock?"

"That would be fine."

"I'll pick you up here." He took her hand in both of his and gave her a smile.

Upstairs in her room, Susan wondered why she had agreed so readily. But she knew the answer. She wanted to see Yolanda again, to make certain she was safe from Cargo, and the Princess of Wales was not the sort of place where one dined alone. She could endure another evening with Abidine, who was, after all, a pleasant enough companion.

The phone rang and she answered it at once, resigned to another call from Inspector Cheever. Instead she heard an unfamiliar Cockney voice ask, "Is this Susan Holt?"

"It is."

"Name's George Cox. I write for the *Daily Telegraph*. Could you spare me just a few minutes of your time?"

"What's this about?" she asked cautiously.

"The death of Jonathan Ellis."

"I know nothing about that."

"All I ask is five minutes. I'm in the lounge."

"It's a waste of your time, but I'll come down."

Her curiosity had the better of her. What did the reporter want, and how had he managed to link her to the Ellis killing? She took the elevator to the lobby, peering into the lounge at the only man seated alone. He was short and bald, and looked reasonably respectable.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cox. What can I do for you?"

He jumped to his feet, perhaps surprised at how quickly she'd appeared. "I don't want to take much of your time. I believe

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Inspector Cheever questioned you earlier today."

"You make it sound as if I'm a suspect," she answered with a smile, sitting down on the sofa next to him. "I was having dinner at the hotel's roof restaurant last evening, and I assure you all of my time is accounted for."

"Certainly you're not a suspect, Miss Holt. In fact, my queries to New York indicate you've been helpful to the police on previous occasions. Perhaps Cheever consulted you for some advice."

She had to laugh at the suggestion. "No, as a matter of fact I called him. I had a bit of information I thought might be useful."

"What information was that?"

"You'll have to ask the inspector."

George Cox smiled, trying to seem friendly. "This story is getting bigger by the hour. This morning I received a sealed envelope from Jonathan Ellis, mailed by his solicitor as soon as the news of his murder broke." He passed her a note handwritten in purple ink and signed with Ellis's name: "If anything happens to me, this will be the reason."

"What was enclosed?" Susan asked.

"He belonged to a group called the Peacock Parliament. They engaged in sexual activities with highly paid prostitutes. Apparently Jonathan Ellis was attempting to blackmail other members of the group. Along with this note was an extortion demand he'd apparently faxed to certain members of the House of Commons and their aides."

"A good motive for murder."

"Ellis wore a hearing aid behind his left ear. I understand the police found a feather caught on it when they examined the body."

"Don't tell me. It was a peacock feather."

"Smart girl! Now you tell me what you know."

"Very little. Certainly nothing about the Peacock Parliament. The sex in my country is a bit more straightforward than that."

"Did you ever meet or speak with Jonathan Ellis?"

"Certainly not! Now I believe your five minutes are up." She stood and held out her hand.

Cox took it with a smile. "They'll be after you. The press won't let this rest. You'll be sorry you weren't more forthcoming with me."

"I'll phone you if I am."

The smile widened. Perhaps he believed her. "Here's my card. I have voice mail if I'm away from my desk."

Susan went back upstairs to shower and change, pleased that she'd learned more from Cox than he had from her.

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"Are Turkish men always this prompt?" she asked as Abidine Tekin ushered her out the hotel's Park Lane entrance.

He smiled. "We are when a charming young woman awaits us. It's such a lovely night I thought we might stroll down to the hotel rather than take a taxi, if that's agreeable with you."

"Certainly. Tell me about your day at Marks & Spencer."

By the time they reached the hotel he had her completely at ease with his funny stories of the afternoon's activities. They took the elevator to the top floor and found a window table awaiting them. "At least it's a different view tonight," he remarked.

"You must be bored with this place," Susan said, aware that Yolanda was on the bandstand with her group, launching into the refrain from a Gershwin standard. The sight of her, alive and well, was reassuring.

"Not at all. I have only begun to sample their menu, and the music is pleasant. I enjoy your American tunes."

They'd had a drink and studied the menu by the time the band took its nine o'clock break. Yolanda, wearing a slinky green gown that reached to her ankles, walked off the stage without a glance in Susan's direction. The room was crowded and perhaps she didn't notice them at the window table.

Susan ordered Dover sole while her Turkish friend chose a steak. Their conversation was pleasant and the wine was good. She was thoroughly enjoying herself, even as the business with masked men and dead bodies and knife attacks continued to churn around at the back of her mind. They ate leisurely and were just finishing when the band returned from its ten o'clock break. Yolanda had changed into a red cocktail dress that showed off her legs. She sang some Duke Ellington jazz numbers from the forties and then settled down to a more danceable tempo.

"Would you like to dance?" Abidine asked.

Susan smiled, emboldened by the wine. "Sure."

This time Yolanda saw her and smiled as they danced in front of the band. As they returned to their table she thought she saw the reporter, Cox, speaking with the headwaiter near the entrance. She wondered if he'd come to spy on her, and realized she was becoming more deeply involved in the scandal.

"What are you thinking?" Abidine asked.

"That I've been here two days and haven't accomplished a great deal for Mayfield's."

He laughed. "You're spreading good will. What more could they want?"

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She glanced toward the headwaiter's station again. He and Cox were both gone, but standing in the entrance, staring fixedly at Yolanda, was Cargo. Susan shivered involuntarily and Abidine asked what was wrong.

"Someone walking on my grave, I guess. Isn't that what they say?" When she looked again Cargo was gone, but she knew it had been him. She still remembered her first sight of him, his knife raised above Yolanda's head.

She remembered it—

"Excuse me for a moment," she told Abidine. "I'll be back."

She hurried toward the ladies' room near the elevators, keeping an eye out for Cargo, but now there was no sign of him. When she emerged a few moments later a couple of women were just getting off the elevator. She had started toward the dining room when suddenly the elevator doors on her left slid open and there was Cargo.

They stared at each other in surprise for just a moment. Susan opened her mouth to speak, but the short man was faster. His hand fastened on her like a claw and he yanked her into the elevator. She had time for the beginning of a scream and then his hand clamped onto her mouth. The doors slid shut just as one of the women outside, seeing what was happening, shouted for help.

Cargo's hands were all over her, pinning her to the wall, tightening on her throat. She gasped for breath and flailed out, hitting the red emergency button as the elevator began its descent. Somewhere a bell began to ring and the elevator stopped, but by now he had both hands on her throat. As his grip tightened she saw spots before her eyes. The emergency bell was still ringing and she thought she heard voices from the other side of the door.

Then, as consciousness was about to leave her, the doors slid open and there was Yolanda holding the ladygun at her side and she raised it and put a bullet through the back of Cargo's head.

"Now we're even," she told Susan.

Somehow Inspector Cheever was there even before Susan had fully recovered herself. They'd taken her to a couch in the ladies' room, and when she finally got to her feet and inspected her bruised throat and torn dress in the mirror, she knew she wanted to see Yolanda. In the corridor a folding screen had been put up to shield the death scene from diners. Police technicians were at work and Susan suspected Cargo's body was still on the floor of the elevator car.

She found Yolanda with Cheever and a police stenographer in

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the restaurant manager's office. The singer smiled at Susan and said, "I'm just telling them how you saved my life last night."

"You more than made up for it just now."

"I'd seen Cargo lurking around out there, and then when you went out and I heard the screams I grabbed my purse and came off the bandstand. When they got that door open and I saw him strangling you I just shot him." The little pearl-handled pistol lay on the desk between the inspector and her.

Susan sat down in the only empty chair. "It's not every day I'm almost strangled. I'm still trying to recover."

Cheever smiled gently but resumed his questioning of Yolanda. "You say you never knew Cargo's real name?"

She shook her head. "He was just Cargo. I—I worked for him once."

"As a call girl?"

She moistened her lips before replying. "Yes. That was why he tried to cut my face last night, because I disobeyed him."

He turned his attention to Susan Holt. "I'd like to hear your version of how you saved Miss Delgado's life."

Susan described what had happened, including the part about the overheard phone call. She could see Cheever was annoyed that she hadn't told the whole story earlier. When she'd finished, Yolanda added, "He'd paged me while I was singing and when I called him back he wanted me to go to a hotel room. He didn't say where, but it was probably the one where Ellis was killed later. I wouldn't do it; that's why he attacked me as I was leaving."

Susan stared at her. She felt a real fondness for the young woman, but she knew that the truth had to come out now. "Yolanda, Cargo didn't attack you because you disobeyed him. He wanted you dead because you obeyed him completely."

"What?" she asked, almost in a daze.

"You killed Jonathan Ellis."

The blood drained from Yolanda's face. "That's impossible. I was on the bandstand singing at eleven-thirty. It was our final set."

"You killed him during the eleven o'clock break, then set his watch ahead twenty minutes before smashing it. Killers have been using that trick for a long time."

"Why would Cargo have wanted him dead?" Cheever asked.

"As you know, Ellis had faxed blackmail demands to several MPs and their aides, threatening to tell the press about the Peacock Parliament. Cargo and the people who paid him decided that Ellis had to die. When Ellis called for a girl last night, Cargo saw his chance. Yolanda was singing upstairs at the same hotel. He

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paged her and when she phoned him during her break he told her what she had to do. She refused at first—that was the part I overheard—but he finally convinced her, probably with more money. Maybe she'd done things like that before. Anyway, after she'd done it he tried to kill her, to shut her up. It often happens in America that hit men are silenced by the people who hired them."

"How do you know he was trying to kill her? She claims he wanted to scar her for disobeying him."

"I saw that knife, Inspector. Cargo had it upraised in his right hand, bringing it down toward her body. It wasn't a cutting motion but a stabbing one. He was trying to kill her, to silence her."

"There's nothing to link her with Ellis's murder."

"But there is! A reporter told me the police found a peacock feather behind his ear, caught on his hearing aid. These men wore peacock masks during their sex games to conceal their identities. That feather shows he was wearing his mask at the time of his death or just before it. He would have worn the mask for only one reason—not to hide his face from Cargo or any of the other men but only to hide it from one of the women. A woman was with him when he died, and probably yanked the mask from his face afterward to hide that very fact."

"The woman might have let Cargo into the room to do the actual killing," Cheever suggested.

Susan shook her head. "Cargo was right-handed. I saw that last night when he had his knife. You told me the killer was left-handed."

The inspector turned toward Yolanda. "Are you left-handed?"

Susan already knew the answer. "This morning in my hotel room I was looking in the mirror and saw her jot down my name and room number on a slip of paper, to send me flowers later. She seemed to be using her right hand in the mirror, which means it was really her left. And there's more. That slip of paper was from a Princess of Wales notepad, the sort hotels keep next to their room phones. It also had the notation *Y 11,* written in purple ink like Ellis used to write that reporter. I think it indicated Yolanda at eleven, the time Cargo said she'd visit Ellis's room."

"That doesn't prove she went there, though."

"Then how did the note get into her purse? She took it with her after she killed him, because it would have implicated her."

Yolanda sat frozen to the spot. Cheever casually moved the little pistol out of her reach and asked, "Is there anything else?"

"Yes. Are we to believe that a singer in a fancy dining room like

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this would wear a beeper strapped to her thigh just so she wouldn't miss a casual phone call? If she needed a beeper that urgently she was either dealing drugs or still working as a call girl. The only thing she briefly resisted was Cargo's hiring her for a killing, and he overcame that quickly enough. I can tell you too that last evening she changed her gown just before the last set. Tonight she changed earlier. I think she waited till after the murder to change, in case she got blood on her dress."

Yolanda scoffed at that. "I had a fifteen-minute break. Is that time enough to take an elevator down to the ninth floor, stab Ellis, come back up here, and change my gown?"

Inspector Ellis blinked his eyes and asked, very quietly, "How did you know it was on the ninth floor? None of the press accounts gave the room number and you said Cargo didn't give it to you."

"I—one of the waiters told me."

"Which one, Miss Delgado?"

The spirit seemed to go out of her then. "What do you want me to say?" she whispered.

"You have the right to remain silent, and to have your lawyer present."

"Never mind that," she said with a wave of her hand.

"Then tell us what you did with the knife."

Her eyes were dull and unfeeling as she answered. "It was a steak knife I took from the kitchen. I dropped it through that little space between the elevator floor and the hallway. I suppose it's at the bottom of the shaft."

"I'm afraid you'll have to accompany us, Miss Delgado."

"Can I tell my band I won't be back?"

"We'll tell them."

She gazed at Susan for just a moment, then said to the inspector, "If it's names you want, I can give you names. Everyone involved—Cargo's bosses, a dozen or more of our customers. I'm ready to deal."

"We'll see."

Susan left the room and walked back across the dance floor to the window table where Abidine still waited. "They said you were with the police. You were gone a long time."

She looked across at the band, playing a slow blues number. "Not so long as Yolanda will be gone."●

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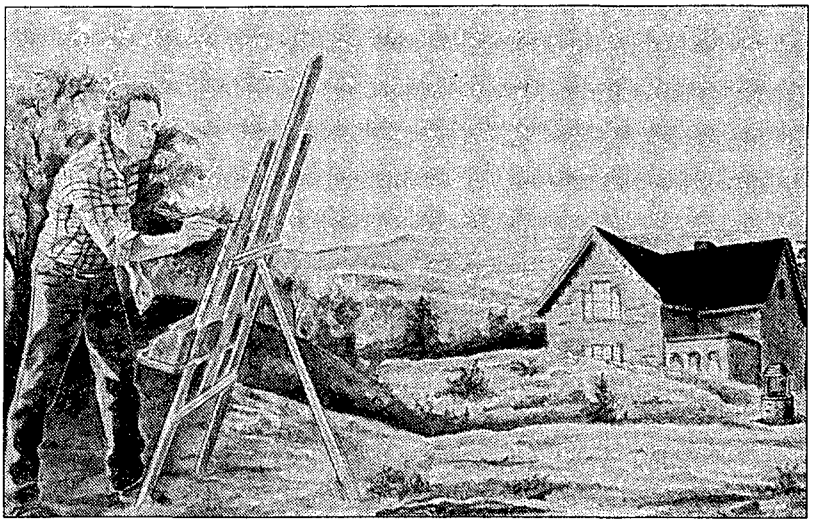

Art by Steve Cavallo

THE STONE HOUSE

by Donald Olson

"We've decided on a trial separation," Robert would tell their friends, and then laugh at their astonishment. "No, no, not *us*. A separation *of* us—from the city." A move designed, as he put it, to restore him to sanity—which of course no one took seriously, Robert being a socially well-adjusted and perfectly sane young man, so far as one can apply such terms to any dedicated artist deeply committed to his work.

What he really meant was that by escaping from the city he hoped to achieve a freshness of vision, to rediscover the indefinable something he'd lost. Although his last two shows had not been flops exactly, neither had they done anything to advance his reputation; he began to fear his powers were waning.

His wife Nicole, on the other hand, remained at first openly dubious, feeling that Robert might be using the city and its climate of violence as a scapegoat for his own personal misgivings. For

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years the city had been the source and subject of his inspiration, and she failed to see how moving to the country could restore his faith in himself as an artist.

Gauguin, she argued, might have been an even greater artist if he'd never gone to the South Seas; Van Gogh might have lived to a productive old age had he not fled Paris for the sunny fields of Arles. "How can a change of scene make you a better painter?" she asked Robert.

"All I know, darling, is that the very atmosphere of the city is starting to cloud the way I *see* things. It's distorting my vision."

"Artists make good detectives," mystery fan and collector Ellen Nehr said in a recent article for *Mystery Readers Journal*, "since by the very virtue of their occupations they observe things and events; the smallest item that is out of place eventually contributes its own clue." In the case of the artist in Donald Olson's new story, the search for a scene to paint opens up an unusual opportunity to use those oh-so-Holmesian skills. ✝

A specious argument, thought Nicole, while being forced to admit that Robert's increasingly dark moods of cynicism were starting to erode what at least on the surface had been a life of domestic harmony. She'd begun to fear that their marriage itself was revealing tears in its fabric which she'd hoped time alone together could mend.

For Robert, the rape and murder of a young coed by a gang of hooligans in the alley below their apartment was the deciding factor.

"That does it," he declared. "I'm going to tell Ernie we're accepting his offer."

The offer was for a summer's loan of a small country place upstate which would be vacant while their friend was in Europe for three months.

"Darling, it's not as if we're buying the place," Robert said. "If it turns out to be a mistake, I'll be the first to admit it."

"What about the shop?" Nicole was the co-owner of a small antiques shop in the City.

"We've been through all that. Summers are slow. Pauline can

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handle the shop. Think what fun you can have nosing out treasures in the country."

The farmhouse outside the village of Scandia came as a delightful surprise to Nicole, who hadn't trusted friend Ernie's description of its charms. The living room had a fieldstone fireplace and windows offering a superb view of the foothills; kitchen and bath had been updated, and most of the furniture was of that vintage oak recently much sought after by the antiques trade. Robert turned the north-facing sun porch into a studio and in only a few days Nicole was pleased to observe a change, a lightness and buoyancy, in his mood. The peaceful solitude seemed to produce an effect like that of a powerful antidote upon a chronic infection of the spirits.

They made love for the first time in weeks.

"I knew it would be like this," Robert declared happily, holding Nicole in his arms. "Didn't I tell you, darling? Isn't it wonderful being able to go to bed without even locking the doors?"

"And waking up to the sound of birds instead of sirens?"

"The way I feel now I don't ever want to go back," he said. "I think if I went back . . . I don't even *want* to think about it."

"You won't get bored with only me for company?"

"Don't be silly. And we can have our friends up for weekends, but not yet. Not till I've begun doing some really good work."

"Blissfully peaceful, isn't it? As if nothing bad could ever happen out here."

"It's because people out here know how to live in peace, with themselves and each other."

They'd been there a week when Robert burst into the house from one of his sketching trips about the countryside. "Darling, you must come with me tomorrow. I've found the ideal subject for my first canvas. There's this old stone house—it has to be eighteenth century—set in a grove of cedar trees at the foot of a long slope. Pure Wyeth. You'd love it."

"Great. I'll bring a picnic lunch."

"And pick wildflowers. That's how I see it, with this field full of buttercups in the foreground and the pale blue hills beyond."

Such enthusiasm reminded Nicole of the old Robert, and with a light heart she packed their lunch next morning. Robert hummed joyfully beside her as they drove along the dusty road that wound to the top of a high ridge where they parked. The sun was already halfway up the sky and a gentle breeze tempered the heat of the

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day. They walked through the trees to the edge of the slope, where Robert set up his easel in the shade of a massive oak behind a low screen of hawthorn.

"Look down there," he said. "Lovely, isn't it?"

The house at the foot of the slope was quite as charming as Robert had promised, weathered brick and a slate roof, with a white-painted clapboard extension obviously of later date. Nor did the somewhat dilapidated outbuildings detract from its appeal.

"But Robert, you said it was abandoned. It can't be, there's washing on the line."

"It looked abandoned yesterday. I didn't see a soul. Check out that old Ford. There's an antique for you."

"No one can see us, can they?"

"Not way up here in the shade. No matter if they did."

"I doubt country folk welcome trespassers any more than us city critturs."

"Look at that old well in the yard. Must be as old as the house."

"I wonder what the house is like inside. I'd love to see it."

"Maybe we could drop in later."

Nicole settled down on the grass. It was cool under the oak tree and the scent of grass and flowers delighted her. It was a scene, on that warm summer day, to gladden the heart of any refugee from the stress and clamor of the city and she loved Robert for wanting to share it with her. It seemed ages since they'd really shared anything.

Robert had worked for only a few minutes when the first sign of life appeared in the scene below them. The door of the house opened and a man came out, stood for a moment looking around him, and then moved off toward the somewhat tipsy barn. Even from atop the slope Nicole could see that he was tall and broadly built, with thick dark hair; in fact, from this distance he looked a lot like Robert, even to the jeans and plaid shirt he wore.

"A man of the soil," Robert murmured. "I envy him. I envy the life he must enjoy down there. I'll bet he doesn't know the meaning of the word stress."

Nicole teased him with a laugh. "Sounds like we're recapturing our romantic vision of life."

Presently the man came out of the barn with a coiled length of rope over his shoulder. Dropping it near the well, he disappeared back inside the barn. Moments later a woman came out of the house carrying a wicker laundry basket. Nicole sat up to watch

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her as she began taking the washing off the line, folding each sheet and garment and placing it in the basket. She too wore jeans and what might have been a man's white shirt. The sun shone on her long blond hair. Suddenly a big ginger cat streaked across the yard and jumped into the basket. The woman plucked him out, nuzzling him against her cheek.

Nicole was touched for an instant by that same sense of envy Robert had voiced. There was something idyllic about the scene, a glimpse into another world, a simpler, cleaner, gentler world, immune from the anxieties and endless harassing complexities of city life. A line of poetry drifted across her mind: *For thus I live remote from evil-speaking; rancor, never sought, comes to me not . . .*

Now the man came out of the barn carrying a large can by its handle.

"Darby and Joan," said Robert, busily sketching.

"Too young. Dick and Jane."

"A toddler or two and the cast is complete."

Nicole sighed. "What a great place to bring up kids. Oh, Robert, how I envy them that house. I can almost picture the rooms, the antiques I'd fill them with."

"And the toddlers?"

"Why not?" Robert had always sidetracked the issue of starting a family. The city was no place to raise children. Whereas here . . .

The man stood watching as the woman picked up the basket and returned to the house. He must have said something to her, for she paused at the door, looked across at him, and appeared to shake her head before vanishing into the house. The cat curled up on the doorstep. The sun rose higher in the cloudless sky. The day grew warmer.

Nicole stood up and peered over Robert's shoulder. The picture was already taking shape in an underpainting of the gray tones.

Down below, the man stripped off his shirt and flung it down, sunlight gleaming on his broad shoulders and deep chest.

"Try doing that in the city," said Nicole. "You'd be arrested for indecent exposure."

"Not really," he laughed. "But that's what I mean. These people still enjoy a kind of primitive freedom we're denied. Look at that guy. Adam before the Fall. I'd like to paint him."

"He wouldn't let you. He'd be too shy."

At that point something happened to shock them out of their enchantment with this tapestry of pastoral beauty. The man

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strode across the yard to the house, picked up the cat by the scruff of its neck, walked slowly to the old stone well, lifted his arm, and dropped the cat into the well. Nicole uttered a gasp of disbelief.

"Good God," said Robert. "Did he really do that?"

"I can't believe it. How horrible."

"Maybe the well's filled in. Maybe it's a game they play and the cat'll come crawling out."

They watched, neither believing it would happen. The man returned to the barn and soon reappeared holding some unidentifiable object which he carried across the yard and placed close against the foundation of the white-painted annex.

"What the *hell* is he doing now?" asked Robert.

Morning light still bathed the house, yet Nicole felt a creeping uneasiness, as if the sun had turned its face away, leaving the scene as colorless as Robert's canvas.

Robert had moved away from the easel and now crouched beside Nicole behind the screen of hawthorn.

Presently the man, moving with an air of calm deliberation, picked up the can, returned to the annex, and began pouring something along the foundation all the way to the corner, where he vanished from sight for a few minutes before reappearing without the can.

"Somehow I don't think he was watering the flowers," said Robert.

"There are no flowers."

The man crossed to a wooden bench built to encircle the trunk of the tallest cedar tree, where he sat down, hunched forward with his hands resting on his knees, remaining there motionless, as unmoving as Robert and Nicole high on the slope above him. Presently—perhaps ten minutes had passed—they saw the man lift his head as the door of the house opened and the woman came out, now wearing a dress, pale blue in the sunlight. She was carrying a suitcase, obviously heavy from the way her arm and shoulder sagged. She set it down, stood erect, and appeared to be staring across the yard at the man on the bench. Then she picked up the suitcase and started walking slowly away down the drive leading from the house to the dirt road just visible through the trees.

At that point the man leaped up and swiftly followed her, reaching out and seizing her by the arm. She dropped the suitcase and tore free. They faced each other, seemingly engaged in a heated

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dispute. Then once more, with what looked like a violent gesture of rejection or despair, the woman picked up the bag and got as far as the mailbox at the foot of the drive before the man came running after her, this time seizing her from behind in a tight embrace, then all but dragging her back up the drive. At one point she broke free and started running, only to be dragged back, this time all the way into the house.

Nicole grabbed Robert's arm, turning her face away from the scene below. "Darling, I don't want to watch anymore. I don't want to stay here. I don't like it."

Robert didn't move or look at her, his face pale, his eyes fixed on the stone house. Nicole gave his arm a shake. "Robert, come away. This has nothing to do with us. We shouldn't even be watching."

Still he said nothing; she felt his body tense as the man came out of the house moments later, strode purposefully to the barn, and this time came back into view carrying a shotgun.

"Robert . . . please." Nicole's voice was a whisper of entreaty and dismay.

The man, holding the shotgun in the crook of his arm, moved back across the yard and entered the house. Seconds later the sound of a shot, surprisingly loud, seemed to echo and fade away. Robert sprang to his feet and stepped forward into the sun's glare. Just then, the man came through the door and moved to whatever he'd placed below the annex wall, dropped to his knees, and engaged in some action hidden from the watchers' view. Quickly thereafter he crossed to the well, picked up the coil of rope, and returned to the house.

Before Nicole could stop him, Robert started down the slope. She ran after him, seized him as violently as the man had seized the fleeing woman, and tugged frantically at his arm.

"Robert, no! Don't go down there. We mustn't."

"You stay here," he ordered, but she refused to release his arm.

"No! It's got nothing to do with us."

His eyes blazed at her with a look of angry rebuttal. "That's just what you said the night we heard the screams in the alley. The very words."

With that he broke free and moved swiftly down the slope, Nicole trailing behind him at a clumsy trot. Had the sun been less bright, they might have spotted it sooner; as it was, they were halfway down the slope before the flames, licking the lower boards of the annex, outshone the sun's brilliance.

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"My God," cried Robert, "he rigged something to start a fire. He must be nuts."

They were both running now, their legs whipping through the tall grass and buttercups. Breathless at the foot of the slope, they both paused momentarily as Robert, looking around, spotted a tarpaulin covering a small tractor. He raced forward, snatched it up, and ran toward the house, proceeding to smother the flames by stamping on the tarpaulin.

Only when they were out did he move, panting and sweaty, toward the fanlighted front door of the house. Again, Nicole tried to restrain him. "Don't, Robert, please. Don't go in there."

The door was ajar. Robert pushed it open just far enough to peer inside, and then more boldly thrust it wide open and stepped across the threshold. Nicole, trembling and uncertain, followed.

At first they saw nothing but a wide entrance hall with an oval braided rug on the highly polished floorboards, a pine settle, and a plain oak staircase. The stone walls of the house seemed to enclose and thicken the heavy silence that greeted them.

Robert moved to the door on the left and stopped abruptly, his hand gripping the frame. Looking past him, Nicole gasped as she spotted the dripping stains of blood on the white-painted wall.

"Jesus," Robert whispered hoarsely.

The woman's blood-soaked body lay at the base of the pine-paneled fireplace, the shotgun beside her. Robert shoved Nicole back into the hall before moving to kneel beside the body, feeling for signs of life. There were none.

In a pantry or storage room beyond the kitchen, they found the man's body hanging from what might have been a meat hook in the ceiling.

Nicole rushed outside to be sick, arms wrapped tightly around her chest as if to still the wild beating of her heart. Moments later Robert stumbled through the door and leaned heavily against the stone wall, feeling its warmth soak into his cold flesh.

"Go back up the hill," he said. "I'll see what name is on the mailbox."

Without a backward glance, Nicole trudged up the long grassy slope and waited, shivering, for Robert to join her.

Without speaking, he gathered up his equipment, folded his easel, and with Nicole beside him carrying the picnic basket, made his way back to the car.

At the farmhouse Robert called the sheriff's office, said only:

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"You'd better get out to the Dorset place. Something awful's happened," and quickly hung up. Then he kindled a fire in the stone fireplace, and when it was ablaze thrust the picture of the stone house into the flames.

That night Nicole woke from a restless sleep to find Robert standing at the window gazing out into the night. She rose and went to him, putting her arm around his naked waist.

"Try not to think about it," she pleaded. "There was nothing you could do."

"We knew something was happening down there. Something bad. When we saw the gun in his hands we could have shouted, waved, made him see us. We might have stopped it."

"We might have got ourselves killed."

"We'll never know what it was all about," he said. "We'll never know *why.*"

"She was leaving him, that much seems clear."

With a tremor in his voice, and as if he were trying to penetrate some mystery too deep for human understanding, he said, "God, it was so beautiful down there. So peaceful. So perfect."

"Come back to bed, darling. We want to get an early start in the morning."

Nicole tidied the house while Robert packed, and midmorning found them ready to leave.

We'll go back to the City, Nicole thought. We'll pick up where we left off. Our lives will be the same as before. Nothing will have changed.

Yet she knew in her heart this was not true, any more than was Robert's vision of the country and of life in the stone house. Perhaps it was the miles of silence that lengthened his unsmiling eyes or perhaps something more subtle and complex, as unfathomable as the mystery they were leaving behind, something, at any rate, created in Nicole's mind an unsettling awareness that with every mile they drove, Robert was somehow drifting further and further away from her, and that when they reached the city from which he'd so desperately wanted to escape, she would be arriving home with a stranger. ●

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SOUVENIR

by Elaine Campbell Smith

We watched the old man day and night. Never was he out of our sight. One of us was always there, spying on him. We knew what he was going to do before he did it. And why. More than he knew, we knew.

During that summer of 1981, after we'd graduated from high school and hadn't begun college, nothing in Miami intrigued us more than the old man, and no part of the city was more fascinating to us than that area beneath the high-flown double overpass where he lived.

Although she has two published novels to her credit in the romance genre, Elaine Campbell Smith has written only one other published short story, a piece that appeared in the *Southern Review*. Currently a Ph.D. candidate at Florida State University, Ms. Smith lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with her husband and children.

He was disgusting: a rail-thin man with a basketball paunch and crusted grime. Loose skin dragged his face into furrows, and alps of blood veins crossed the landscape of his hands. He smelled of stale urine, old farts, and dehydrated feces, decayed teeth, rotted food, and poor health. A living corruption, his breath was a fetid miasma of pollution. But each of us sniffed it. Each spent time huddled beside him beneath the twin concrete roof as we monitored his sleep, counted his respirations, hung on lopsided snores, and tried to fathom his dreams.

What could he, of all wretched creatures, dream?

Where he had come from, we didn't know. He appeared one day, or had been there all along and our vision at last plucked him from refuse and postponed debris. He wore a suit — matched trousers and jacket of haggard material so pinched by time and filth they'd lost any denotation of crease, any pretense of definite color; the

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suit could once have been black or blue or brown. The elbows and knees meshed threads that showed in flashes skin that echoed the dark amorphous shade of the cloth.

We imagined his history. For hours that summer, as we took turns watching through binoculars, we gave him heritage. He once was a rich man who had squandered his wealth on a worthless woman, had made ill-fated investments in the stock market, had committed a crime and spent his capital on attorneys so he could be free. He once was married, happy and with children; his wife had thrown him out because of his infidelity, because of her infidelity, because he beat her, because he didn't. He was hiding from the Mafia, the underground, the CIA. He was an illegal alien. He was a Vietnam vet with posttraumatic stress syndrome and could no longer live in society. He was insane, had Alzheimer's, was dying of cancer. He'd always been aloof, alone, debased—an abandoned child left to grow up and age beneath the overpass.

Part of our captivation could have been caused by the disparity between his station in life and our own. Well-dressed, clean, and deodorized, smelling like the money our parents were made of, we bought a used Ford to prowl the underpass and glide unseen in squalor.

Going singly, or together, we parked the car nearby and shadowed the old man. He creaked from between deserted chunks of cement high below the roadway, picked his way along the steep downward slant, paused to urinate weak saffron drizzling from a withered penis tucked in without a shake. At the bottom of the incline, he picked up a charcoal scrawl on cardboard: "Will Work for Food," and carried it to the entry ramp where cars sometimes slowed to make the turn.

Who would ask him to work? What could he do?

Some days, he got nothing. Some days a hand with a one, a five, extruded from a car and the old man grasped the bill, made it disappear into a squalid pocket, and waited again.

He used the money for food and wine. He ate cold weiners on cold buns. By the time a bun reached his mouth, it was dark with hand scum. With a sharp piece of concrete, he hacked open cans of pork and beans and scooped them, two-finger poi, between gaping, rotted teeth and swallowed them whole. He drank cheap apple wine and made a single quart last all day unless he'd been

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liberally favored at the side of the road; then he drank two quarts. Or three.

He defecated across the highway on the slope opposite his bed, unconcealed, like a dog.

A scab on a putrefied infection, he enchanted us. We made a rule that summer: take something of his. No duplicates. But he had little. What could we take?

We drew straws to learn who went first.

A bottle of wine, not quite empty, was scorned, but it had been his; the code was upheld. A sliver off the cuff of a trouser leg, carefully sheared while he slept and dreamed. His sign. What would he do without his sign? How could he work for food? A button snipped from his exhausted jacket. A lock of dirty hair.

What did he have left untouched, untaken?

A jug of kerosene appeared in our midst. He had his life.

We waited. We watched. We beseeched the appropriate time. False starts, together, up the slope to halt in indecision, for traffic on the street below, because the old man stirred in his sleep, from lack of courage.

Summer lurked toward its close.

A three-quart day. The old man slept. Traffic ceased in the predawn dark. Our temerity, urged by dwindling time, intensified. One behind the other, carefully, sidling past scattered debris, we approached. The kerosene, warmed to body-temperature by hours held in wait between our thighs, spilled shadows on the threadbare suit and filled the narrow space with fumes. The old man slept. With the last pint of liquid, we dribbled a trail down the slope then looked above and around for moving vehicles. Saw none. We lit the match and hurled it. A sputtering, meandering blaze mounted and abruptly, suddenly, engulfed the old man. He grunted once—a low, puzzled, feral sound—flailed once, flashing wings of fire, then jerked erect. His head struck the concrete buttress, a weighty thud, and he dropped again. And slept.

Scattered, shattered, unable to share a glance, we bolted to our distant vantage and watched the flames flare and fade, flare and fade, flare and fade and fade and fade.

After that summer, we never sought each other out, never spoke again. I saw one of them today, and in the face, the fire. ●

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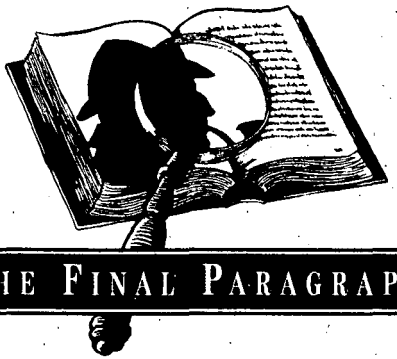

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Good for the Soul

by Henry Slesar

Pulaski was in the doghouse. Actually, it was his shingled brownstone on Morris Avenue, where he sprawled in a club chair, wearing T-shirt and jeans, drinking soya milk and staring with empty eyes at a morning talk show. He needed a shave. He needed breakfast. He needed Ginny, who had taken their four-year-old daughter to "visit her mother." Cops' wives were always "visiting their mothers." It was one of the job hazards, like gunshot wounds, heart attacks, and sudden suspensions.

When the doorbell rang, Pulaski went barefoot across the cold linoleum. Even behind the screen-door camouflage, he could see the deep scowl on the face of Captain Weeks. The chill in his soles spread to his whole body. Was Pritchard dead?

"No," Weeks growled when Pulaski let him in. "He's got a bump on his head the size of your doorknob, but he's alive."

"But I heard they were operating on him. It sounded serious."

"They thought they had to relieve some intracranial pressure, so they took him to the OR. I spoke to Doc Cheney just before coming here. He said Pritchard will be good as new when he comes out of the anaesthetic. He's lucky," the captain grunted. "And so were you."

"I didn't mean to hit him so

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hard, Captain. I just lost my head."

"You're also going to lose a month's pay. Maybe even more, if the review board wants to lean on you." Weeks sighed and sank into the vacated club chair. "What's the matter with you, Ed? Why'd you get so crazy?"

"I don't know," Pulaski said mournfully. "It was just, well, running into the guy in my own church. Seeing him coming out the door in that nice blue suit, and looking like he just talked personal to the angels. When everybody knows he killed those two girls, Captain. Even you know he killed those kids."

"Yeah, I know it. But there's no case," Weeks said. "Even if Pritchard was spotted at the scene of the crime both times—there's no physical evidence. We did our best, but it wasn't enough." His voice was almost plaintive.

"Maybe it's because I got a daughter, too," Pulaski said. "Maybe that's what made me do it. There he was, smiling like a saint, heading for his car. He didn't know I was a cop until I started talking to him, but he kept right on smiling and said he wasn't going to answer any more questions. I said it wasn't official, I just wanted to know what it felt like to get away with murdering two innocent little girls. You know what he did then? He laughed. *Laughed.* That's when I grabbed him. That's when I told him tell me the truth or—" Pulaski stopped.

"Or you'd do what, Ed?"

"It was just talk, Captain, just a bluff. Even a bluff can make a guy confess sometimes. But he took it seriously, and started kicking me. That's when I hit him and that's how he slammed his head against the car door and knocked himself out. . . ."

Weeks stood up. "I'm going to the hospital," he said. "Pritchard will be coming out of it in another hour. . . . You've got nothing else to do, why don't you come with?"

"What for?"

"Maybe I can show you something. That there are other ways to get a criminal to talk—besides bashing in his head."

"Not this guy, Captain, never."

Weeks grinned. "I'd bet you fifty bucks if you had the money. Can I use your phone? There's somebody I have to call first."

By the time they arrived at the hospital, two assistants from the D.A.'s office were outside Pritchard's door, both looking like cats with cream in their whiskers. They seized the Captain and made noises of delight, and Pulaski realized that the promise had been fulfilled. Pritchard had talked. Pritchard had admitted his crimes. All Pulaski wanted to know was *why?*

Why did the killer confess?
Turn to page 157 for The Final Paragraph.

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Art by Darryl Elliott

THE PROMISE SQUAD

by Brendan DuBois

The rain had stopped by the time Slater arrived at LaGuardia. He sat in the rear of a black Lincoln Town Car with tinted windows, driven in by two guys in tan cloth raincoats whose necks were so thick they bulged over the collars of their white shirts. He had been picked up at the hotel almost an hour earlier. In the drive from the city to the airport, they had said not one word to him, and he hadn't minded a bit. Slater had spent the time looking out the window, letting his mind drift, looking at the gray buildings and streets and dull lights, not wanting to think of where he was going this rainy morning. Under one section of a bridge on the trip out, a group of homeless people huddled around a smoky campfire, as the taxicabs and limos streamed past to the airport. The driver took the Town Car down an access road to a fenced-in area with a small guard building. He rolled down the window and he and his companion flashed identification cards at the guard

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who came out. The guard looked competent enough; he wrote down the license plate number, and then went back into the small building. There was a buzzing noise, the gate slid back, and the driver took the Town Car out to the runway. The asphalt was slick with water and spilled fuel oil, and Slater thought he saw a rainbow in one of the puddles as the car splashed through.

Another hard-boiled adventure from the winner of the Private Eye Writers of America's 1994 Shamus Award (for the *EQMM* story "The Necessary Brother"). Congratulations to Brendan DuBois on a well-deserved Shamus—and on his second place finish for the 1995 *EQMM* Readers Award! †

They stopped near an air force CT-39 executive jet, and Slater made out the sounds of the engines whining as he stepped out. Two uniformed air force security police flanked the stairs to the jet, wearing dark blue berets and even darker raincoats. The raincoats were open, shielding their M-16s from the steady mist. Out in the cold and dreariness of the October morning, Slater felt that old feeling settle into his chest and shoulders, of going into some sort of harm's way, doing work he hated. Not much of a life. He resisted an urge to tip the driver and companion, and nodded to the two security police officers as he went up the short gangway, resisting another temptation to say, "Good morning, sky cops."

Not that he was averse to making insults. It was just that it was too damn early in the morning.

Even with the cabin door open, the interior of the jet was warm. A woman in an air force uniform smiled as he took off his raincoat, and she held out her hands for it. She hung it up in an aft closet as he went forward. She was slim, nicely built, and even in her dull uniform, her tanned face and dark blond hair caught Slater's eye. The cabin was small, with only four seats and a rear couch area. He could make out a short entryway to the flight cabin, and two men with short haircuts and air force issue sunglasses quickly glanced back at him, and then one of them reached over and shut the cabin door. He took the farthest seat up front, and found a thick manilla envelope waiting for him. He sat down and put the envelope in his lap. The seat was wide and leather-lined, and he clicked on the seatbelt as the woman came forward. She had two chevrons on her sleeve and her nametag said COONEY.

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"Can I get you anything before we take off?" she asked, her voice pleasant enough. He doubted that she knew anything about him or his background, for if she did, he was sure that she'd be up front in the crew cabin, begging to be left off.

"No, not now," Slater said. "But I'll be in the mood for breakfast, once we're at cruising. That possible?"

Same cheery smile. "No problem at all," and Cooney sauntered back. Slater wondered why she was wasting her time and talents in this man's air force. She'd do much better working one of the civilian airlines. Maybe she was one of the dedicated ones, the kind that still believed in duty, honor, and country.

She went to the rear of the aircraft and Slater fidgeted with the envelope for a moment, wondering if he should open it now and risk ruining his appetite, or open it later and risk losing his breakfast. He was still wondering when there was the sound of feet on the gangway. Slater swiveled the chair around and felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. It was Granger, puffing from the exertion, nodding at him and then tossing his own black raincoat at Cooney. Slater could tell that something about Granger's presence made the woman cringe, and Slater didn't like the look on her face. Granger's features were thick and ruddy, as if he didn't care to know anything about the word cholesterol, and he thought he was being modish by combing his hair back, using some awful sort of styling gel that made the strands of the hair lump together.

"Well," Granger said, knowing enough to sit down at one of the two rear seats. "We ride again, Slater. The promise squad."

Slater nodded back. "You can go to hell."

He swiveled his chair forward and the jet began to move. He looked out the window as the jet lifted up and out, and saw the lights of the island city below him, seeing where he had been, where he had grown up, and where he was presently dying just a little bit more every day. There were streets below him, and intersections and avenues and dead ends, and he watched them all as the nearly silent aircraft crawled up into the early morning sky.

When he had been some months into his teenage years, Slater had come to know more about the streets of his neighborhood, and that was also when he began to notice the little cool feeling at the back of his throat that would not go away, that would not let him be. It came to him during the afternoon, sharing the three-room apartment with his mother, fat and breathy, nodding off in front of the television set, while his sister Clair, only a few years older

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than he was, rocked back and forth in her chair, eyes blank, letting her baby son Carl suck aimlessly at a bottle filled with either milk, water, or apple juice. It came during his walks to school, his sneakers crunching the little vials of glassware, going past the corners where the tall women in short skirts gossiped and whispered, their voices deep, the faint shadows of whiskers on their faces making their makeup look lumpy. And it came at night, just after Clair and Carl had fallen asleep, when he was still awake and he'd rest his chin on the windowsill, flaking bits of lead paint sticking to his skin. He would look at all those bright lights and listen to the horns and sirens and the muffled gunshots and rapid, scared, running steps on the concrete sidewalk below him, and his throat would close up, and he would be afraid he couldn't breathe.

Then he would burrow under the thin blankets and wrinkled sheet and read books by flashlight until the letters seemed to melt off the pages and he had to sleep.

And one day he saw a place that was different in his neighborhood, where no graffiti ever soiled the wall, where the sidewalk was clean, and each morning a tall, muscular man in a uniform would walk in, strolling along the sidewalk with a style that puzzled Slater, until he realized it was an inner peace and confidence. Watching him, Slater shook his head, but there came a day when he had saved up enough courage to walk through that door.

The man looked up from behind a desk, wearing a light green uniform, little bars and medals across his chest. The man's shirt was clean, the office was neat with pamphlets and brochures, and when the door whispered shut behind him, Slater wished he could go home at that minute and come back with a sleeping bag and all of his stuff, and live here forever.

"You need something, there, fella?" the man had asked, and Slater came over, conscious of his dirty jeans, black T-shirt, and scuffed sneakers, and he nodded and just sat down in the chair. The chair had no cuts or tears, or tape holding the stuffing inside, and the fabric of the seat was cool to his back.

Slater said, "I want to know more. Like how I can get in."

The man's head was shaved and the dark skin seemed almost polished. He sat back in his chair and toyed with his pencil and said, "How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"You doing okay in school?"

Slater shrugged and the man didn't like that, not for an instant, and his voice grew sharp and said, "This is a different time,

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young'un, and we're looking for the brightest. We don't take any freak who decides he wants a free trip and education. Now. You sit up straight there and answer my questions like a man, and don't give me any of those shrugs. Got it?"

Slater got it. "Mostly Bs and Cs."

The man nodded. "You got a record? You do any juvie time?"

"Nope. I just been rousted here and there. Nothing serious."

"Hmmm," the man said. He tapped his pencil a few times and said, "You stay with your school, m'man, and you get good grades and graduate. Then you come back here and see me or whoever else is sitting behind this desk, and we'll see what we can do."

He leaned forward and Slater realized just how thick the man's wrists were, and saw a pink, thick scar running up the back of his left hand. "Why are you interested anyway? You think we're something tough? You think we're the baddest gang, you like guns, maybe you think you'd get to ride in a big tank? Is that it?"

Slater scrunched lower in his seat. "No, that's not it."

"Oh? Then what is it?"

Slater looked over his shoulder, out at the streets just waiting for him beyond the thin glass door that had led into this quiet and warm place. "It's crazy out there. Nothing's working and nobody cares and I don't fit. I want to get out of here."

The expression on the man's face changed some, and then he reached into a top desk drawer, pulled out a business card, and passed it over. Slater turned it over in his hands, felt the raised print, afraid of getting the white cardboard dirty.

The man's voice was softer. "You keep that, and you bring it back after you graduate, and we'll get you out of here. I promise."

Slater nodded, and then he left. He returned three years later with the card, the piece of cardboard still clean and sharp, and the promise was kept.

Promises. He looked out the window at the scenery passing below him, highways and trees and hills. One of the few times he could remember when a promise was kept. There was a motion and he turned quickly in his seat, and Cooney, the air-force woman, looked a bit startled. But the look only lasted for a moment, and the smile and self-confidence came back and she handed over a small leather-bound menu.

"I thought you'd be interested in some breakfast," she said.

He tried to smile back. "You thought right. You just stay here for a second and I'll give you my order."

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He opened the menu and glanced down and looked up and said, "You hungry at all?"

The question seemed to amuse her, and she said, "No, me and the flight crew, we ate before we boarded."

Slater nodded. "That's fine. Just bring me everything on the menu, then, and I'd like double portions."

Cooney's wonderful smile faltered at that. "I'm afraid, well, if I did that, then the other gentleman, well—"

"He wouldn't have breakfast, right?"

She nodded. Slater said, "Senior Airman Cooney, what were your orders concerning me?"

"Sorry?"

"Your orders, Airman Cooney. What were your orders about me?"

By now her smile was entirely gone, and the uncomfortable feeling of guilt began to tug at Slater. She said, "My orders were to give you full cooperation and assistance during the flight."

Slater tried another smile, to put her at ease, but it didn't look like it was working. Oh well. "Then get me breakfast, please. I'm fairly hungry. And another thing. What's your first name?"

Her face seemed a bit pale. "Melanie."

"Well, Senior Airman Melanie Cooney, if that person you call a gentleman back there attempts to come up here, I'd like you to kick him squarely where it counts and put him back in his seat."

Cooney left and Slater looked down at the lumpy manilla envelope. There was a shelf before him, to spread out papers and do work, and there was a television set with a VCR unit set into the near wall. He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair and heard Granger whispering angrily to Cooney, and he tried to put it all out of his mind, just letting other thoughts come to him.

During that spring month he and Poulin were way behind whatever lines existed on somebody's map, traveling and working at night through the rocky desert, and resting during the day. Slater knew many members of the special groups that were operating out here, and he was thankful to whatever gods still existed that he had been paired up with Poulin. At least Poulin had a brain, he could talk, and he had endless stories—many of which were interesting. Other guys would bore you with talk about their wives, their kids, or their cars, and since Slater had none of those particular possessions, he wasn't interested in hearing anybody else's opinion about them. On this night they were near a rutted road that the locals laughably called a highway. They'd dug their gunpit

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and stretched netting overhead during the day, and had pulled it away when the sun had fallen. Their packaged meals were eaten with just water—too dangerous to light one of the fuel pellets to heat them—and the aftertaste remained for a while. Spaghetti and something claiming to be meatballs. It was cold, and Slater was thankful for the knitted wool cap on his head, and gloves. Who'd ever think you'd need winter clothing in a goddam desert. They took turns on watch and instead of napping—for they never got enough sleep, not ever—sometimes Poulin would lay back and look up at the stars and spout on about anything and everything.

Tonight he looked up at the stars, arms crossed, and said, "God, will you look at the stars tonight, Slater."

"Nope—too busy," he replied, looking at the landscape and the road with the night-vision goggles firmly clamped around his head. Everything was a ghostly green and nothing was moving, which was fine. His M-16 was at his side, there was equipment and rucksacks in the tiny pit, and Poulin's feet were pressing into his ribs. Slater didn't mind. The pressure was almost comforting.

"The first real astronomers were Arabs," Poulin went on. "That's why so many stars have Arabic names. Like Betelgeuse. Or Algol. Or Merak. When my ancestors were busy killing each other over feudal estates and your ancestors were equally busy killing each other over watering rights, these folks were predicting eclipses and cataloguing hundreds of stars. Good astronomers, but not so good when it comes to large-scale combat. It's too bad we're spending all this money to travel thousands of miles to kill them."

Slater blinked his eyes at what he saw and said, "Look at that, will you. To the south."

Poulin shifted his weight and swore softly. On the horizon to the south there were flashes of light, rolling flares of light that flickered and glowed like a thunderstorm, far enough away so that the rumbles could not reach their ears. Thunderstorms, in the desert.

"Poor bastards," Slater said. "Arc-light mission, my friend. B-52s from Diego Garcia are busy turning that piece of desert into moonscape. Another example of how God's always on the side of the heaviest artillery."

Poulin breathed, his breath a bit garlicky from their dinner. Last week they had come across a French Foreign Legion squad and had traded some fragmentation grenades for spices and garlic. Anything to make the MREs edible.

"Kind of odd justice, don't you think?" Poulin asked.

"Why's that?"

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Poulin sighed. "Those B-52s travel at night, and you can bet their navigation eventually depends some way on the night stars. Don't you see? Using Arab stars to navigate at night to kill Arabs. Horrible irony."

Slater was going to say something rude about irony but instead he softly said, "Target."

"Where?"

"Roadway. To the west. Puff of dust."

Poulin pulled on his own night-vision goggles. "You got a range?"

"About a thousand meters. Looks like two Scud transports, with Scuds, and a couple of support vehicles."

Poulin shifted in the hole and said, "That's an affirm, my friend. Lase it, will you? I'll get the air on the horn."

He pulled away the M-16 — at this range it wasn't worth anything anyway — and undid the carrying case for the hand-held laser. He powered it up and when the red light flicked to green, he pulled it up and over the hole and sighted down on the convoy. He painted the second vehicle in, the Scud transport, and held the dot of light there as the vehicles chugged through the desert night. Their headlights were off and Slater could not imagine how they were able to move as they did.

Beside him Poulin was whispering into the hand mike, saying, "Cobra, Cobra, this is Mongoose Five. We have multiple targets, have painted same. Two semis with full loads, and two escorts. Grid coordinates eight-niner-zero-zero-four-eight-niner-seven, and seven-zero-zero-niner-two-four-three-six."

Poulin repeated the grid coordinates twice and Slater was going to say something when Poulin said, "Here they come."

There was just a faint whisper, and Slater looked up and saw quick-moving shapes, like hawks or eagles, their shadows blocking out the stars, and then they struck and the convoy disappeared in bubbles of flame and smoke and dirt, the laser-guided bombs traveling at whispering speeds to meet up with the invisible dot of light that was coming from Slater's hands. They only heard the faint detonation sounds, sounds that managed to echo some and ring in their ears, but there were no cries, no screams, no moans. It was too easy, too clean.

Poulin held Slater by the shoulder. "God help me, I love this."

Slater nodded, not knowing how to agree with him without sounding like a madman.

Below them, the fires went on for a while.

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After breakfast he put the two trays aside — he had not eaten everything, but everything on the plates (from muffins to pancakes) had at least a bite or two taken out of it — and he broke open the manilla envelope. The first thing he took out was a VHS tape which he put into the wall-mounted television set and its VCR. He turned down the volume and played the tape backwards and then forwards. The tape came from a television-station feed, and he cared not what the reporter had said or guessed. Words and narration and verbal descriptions were easy to mistake, easy to confuse. It was harder to screw up a straight feed.

The tape showed a house on a slight rise, surrounded by trees. It had an enclosed porch up front, and looked like a two-story farm building. The walls were white and the shutters were black. There was a barn off to the right, and a dirt driveway with a rusting blue GM pickup truck and a white Ford Escort. The lawn was clear save for a tricycle and a basketball. The camera pulled back some and showed a police cruiser, pulled over in front of the lawn. The roadway was poorly maintained asphalt. Just barely visible from the side of the police cruiser were a pair of black uniform shoes and white socks. They appeared to belong to someone lying on his back. Slater played that section of the tape three times. The feet did not move. The police cruiser was white and at the rear it said in block letters: THEBES POLICE — DIAL 911. The trees moved in the breeze, and some of the leaves — orange, red, and yellow—drifted down and rested on top of the police cruiser.

The camera pulled back some more and a young male TV reporter came into view, speaking rapidly into his microphone, though Slater kept the sound turned down. The microphone had a side shield with the numeral "9" in blue, and the young man was wearing a tan trench coat, and gestured widely with his other hand, which held a reporter's notebook. Slater kept the sound off, reran the entire tape four times, and wondered if TV stations bought those coats in bulk.

He only spent a few minutes looking through the other materials in the manilla envelope. The man who lived in the house was Ron Conrad. He worked in the town of Thebes, New Hampshire, as a surveyor. His wife's name was Carol, and they had two children. Jonathan, ten, and Ann, six. Slater read the incident report and looked at the photographs. There was one of Ron and Carol at their wedding. School photographs of Jonathan and Ann. Jonathan had a gap in his front teeth and his hair was cut in the day's style of shaved sides and a combed-back mop, and Ann

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seemed to like wearing braids. Another photograph showed Ron with a moustache and slightly balding up front, but his wife Carol had aged well since the wedding photograph. The two of them were at some sort of picnic, with Ron holding a beer in his hand, turning as if to say something amusing to his wife. He had on a plaid shirt and a cap that said CATERPILLAR in yellow letters, pulled back some, and Carol was also smiling, but straight at the camera. She had one hand on his shoulder. Her hair was dark brown and pulled back in a ponytail, and she had on a white bathing-suit top. She was slim and looked good, and Slater wondered what they were joking about when their photo was taken.

Slater looked up at the TV and VCR. He knew where Ron Conrad was right now. He hoped to God the others were all out of the house.

He slipped the documents and photos back in the envelope, including one showing Conrad wearing the uniform of a U.S. Army sergeant. Soon these people's photographs and the notes about them and their lives would end up in a filing cabinet somewhere, and they would remain alive forever, as long as something called the United States government still ran this piece of territory.

Slater rested his head on his hand and looked outside.

A couple of years after his excursion to the sandbox, he was sitting on a couch in a rented apartment near the base, watching as the sun set and the room gradually grew dark. He had liked the apartment because it was near the base and he didn't mind being so close to his work. Slater would never tell anyone this, not anyone at all, but he was most uncomfortable during those hours when he was off base. Oh, he could have gotten some quarters on the base, but that would have raised attention, and he didn't want that. He just wanted to stay and do his job. That was what he was and what he did, every day of the week. He wasn't sure what the word love meant, but he guessed the feelings he had when he was on duty came the closest.

But on this afternoon Slater had come off duty and the letter he had received was still in his fist. It was mostly the usual bureaucratic nonsense, but one phrase struck right in his head and rattled around in there, like a round popping into an armored vehicle. "Involuntary separation of service." He was being let go. Laid off. Like he was a civilian. A civilian, for God's sake.

He shifted on the couch, listened to the traffic and the low whine of a jet transport landing at the base. The apartment was decorated simply, with a couple of photographs from his travels,

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some citations and plaques, and a framed Iraqi battle flag. In the stillness of the room, the trophies and mementos seemed to mock him. They spoke of sacrifices made, missions achieved, and now, they also spoke of vows that were in the process of being broken.

"Jesus," he finally whispered to himself, "what in hell can I do now?"

In a while he looked up at the dark ceiling, remembered that recruiting sergeant he had met so many years ago. They had promised to take him out, and now they were getting ready to send him back. Slater decided then that he was owed.

Senior Airman Cooney had taken the trays away with just a soft murmur but no real words, and as the jet canted over and started slowing for its descent, Granger puffed his way up and sat down in the other front seat. Slater resisted a childish impulse to turn his seat so his back was facing Granger, and instead he looked over and said, "This being the fourth time, I'd figure you'd give up on the inspiring speeches, Granger."

Granger shook his head. "Nope. No speeches. Just hoping this one will turn out well. Hell, maybe even better than the other three."

"Can't guarantee that, and you know it," Slater said, feeling the heat rise at the back of his neck. "I do what I can and what I'm paid to do. If you guys don't like it, then go find somebody else."

The man shook his head again. "Nope. We're satisfied with your performance. It would just be nice if we get a little more this time."

"Yeah. Right."

The jet tilted more and Cooney called out from the rear, "Seatbelts, gentlemen," and Granger did as she asked, winking at Slater. "Some piece back there, hunh?"

Slater turned away from him, looked out the window. "Too bad the belt doesn't go over your mouth, Granger."

Below him were hills and mountains, and he guessed they were fairly near their destination, or as close as they could get with the size of airports in this state. The hills were fairly shouting at him with their fall foliage and blazes of red, orange, yellow, and green, and Slater wished his first visit to this state weren't related to his work. This place was now spoiled for him, and he knew when he was done here, he could never come back. The memories of what was about to happen would take care of that.

There was a thump as the landing gear came down and the jet made a whisper-smooth landing, and in a minute or two they had taxied to a stop. Cooney got two coats out of the rear closet and as she helped Slater on with his, he said, "I hope you won't mind that

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if I'm asked to file an evaluation, it won't be a perfect one, Senior Airman Cooney."

"Sir?" she asked, puzzlement and anger mixing in her voice.

He buttoned up the coat and leaned over and said, "You let that slug come up front."

She turned away and undid the cabin door, and the stored stairs came out. Slater stepped out onto the runway, the cold morning air of New Hampshire suddenly hitting him in the face like a cold, wet towel. The airport was small, without even a regular control tower, and there were a number of vehicles parked nearby. Slater did some counting and grabbed Granger by the arm and said, "What the hell is this?"

Granger looked defensive, as if he were thirteen and had been found in his bedroom with a pinup of Miss November and a tube of baby oil. "What do you mean? We're not even at the mission site."

"Look out there," Slater said. "There's three state police cruisers and one local cruiser. What kind of circus are you bringing me into, Granger? Get rid of them."

"All of them?"

Slater walked away, not wanting to be where he was. "No, idiot. I don't feel like walking. Just one. That's all we need. Get rid of the rest, and now."

In a few minutes he stood by himself on the runway. The jet had taxied some more, waiting to bring him back to LaGuardia in a day, week, or month, or however long it would take to finish things off. He took a deep breath, surprised at finding himself enjoying the scent of woodsmoke and what seemed to be the dead leaves. There were a handful of other private planes on the strip and the airport building, and not much else. He counted three homes, visible through the foliage, and decided the quiet at night would drive him crazy.

Granger came over, just nodded, and he followed the man to a state police cruiser. It was dark green and had a large emblem on the door that showed what looked like an Indian in profile, and a V-shaped chevron on its side. Slater decided it was the weirdest police symbol he had ever seen. The trooper was male and looked as if he had been stamped out by a machine press somewhere, and as Slater got into the rear he said to Granger, "Take the front. Bad enough I have to fly with you."

The trooper gunned the cruiser out of the airport parking lot and his hand reached down to the console. The siren sound from overhead was piercing. Slater folded his hands together and

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yelled, "Turn off the lights and the noise, damn it!"

The trooper started to say something and Granger said, "Do as the man says."

The back of the trooper's neck turned red and his hand went down to slap at the switches. Slater went back to looking out the window. He seemed to do a lot of that on jobs like this, and he wondered if the average taxpayer would be pleased to know how much he was paid for gazing through glass and thinking idle thoughts.

The fourth and last time Slater had been on the boat was when Kincaid was there, pretending to be in charge and tossing about idiot orders. The crew was Cuban and seemed to put up with Kincaid's nonsense, but Slater had a hard time swallowing it. Kincaid was a few years older but at least twenty pounds heavier than Slater, and most of the weight—those fat cells which weren't permanently residing between the man's ears — had settled into a ridiculous pot belly that strained at the lime-green polo shirts that Kincaid was fond of wearing. He had a fisherman's cap on, the type with a long bill, and khaki shorts that showed off his sunburnt and pudgy legs. He also liked to wear a revolver at his side, complete with Western-style belt and holster, and Slater knew that if the man hadn't been proficient in passing out thin stacks of hundred-dollar bills, the three Cubans would have gutted him and sent him over the side a long time ago.

Slater had been down here for a few months and was doing all right, but something inside was gnawing at him, and in the early morning hours, when the day seemed so damn heavy, he'd remember that recruiting sergeant. Promises made. Would he be proud of where Slater had ended up?

The boat was a converted shrimper, with extended hold for their highly illegal cargo, and the diesels were thumping them out to a nighttime rendezvous with a delivery ship that would take the rest of the white, flaky cargo into the maze of canals and inlets near Growler Key. Two of the Cubans were in the pilothouse, the other was resting at the stern, and Slater was up at the bow, with Kincaid. Despite the heat Slater had on long pants and his SecondChance vest, and slung at his side was an H&K MP5 submachine gun, complete with a 30-round magazine. Two other magazines were in side pockets of his pants. He looked up at the stars overhead in the Caribbean sky, remembering those long desert nights with Poulin, wishing he could think of some of the names that Poulin had given to those bright specks, and Kincaid

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stumbled closer and slapped him on the shoulder.

"'Nother night of excitement, right, pal?" Kincaid said, weaving as if he was getting seasick.

Slater remembered once again that the man was paying his bills, and he said, "A good night is a night without excitement. You should know that."

Kincaid's breath stank of onions and something else. Rotten meat, perhaps? "Well, maybe so," he said. "Still, glad you're aboard, Slater. I like my shotgun guy to at least have English as his first language. Don't know what those other guys are saying to me, even when they think they're talkin' English, and I can't really trust 'em in a tight situation."

He thought that if Kincaid knew his hundred-dollar bills were only buying the appearance of protection—anything heavy started to come down, Slater was looking out for number one — he wouldn't be so happy, but Slater decided not to disillusion him.

"That's what you're paying for, Kincaid."

"Right again," and Kincaid slapped him again on the shoulder. "Hey, why do you carry that hunk of German iron anyway? I'd think a guy like you would like something American, maybe a MAC-10."

Slater smiled. "You mean the phone-booth gun?"

Kincaid cocked his head. "Why do you call it that?"

Slater enjoyed explaining things to a person as dim as Kincaid. "Because the only way you're guaranteed to hit your target is if the two of you are standing in the same phone booth. MAC-10s are good for raising hell and making a lot of noise, but they're worthless at any range."

"Unh-hunh." Kincaid remained silent and Slater looked away, liking the feel of the warm breeze on his face.

Kincaid said, "Be at the point soon," and then he said something that made Slater look back at him. "Hey, you ever think you'd end up here, riding shotgun on a million dollars or so worth of flake?"

It was as if the damn man was reading his mind. "No," Slater said. "No, but you do what you can. I didn't want to work at a 7-Eleven, and I didn't want to live under an overpass. So here I am."

Kincaid's voice was almost quiet. "What I've seen of your service record, you could have gone far, Slater."

And he thought, *Service record?* How in hell had Kincaid ever seen his service record? Slater took two steps back and was undoing his MP5 when the searchlights hit, bracketing both sides of the boat. Ghostly and echoing loudspeaker voices boomed across the waters, speaking first in Spanish, and then in English. Coast

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Guard. U.S. Customs Service. Drop your weapons. Cut your engine. Hands on your heads. Slater turned and the Cubans were gathered at the stern, hands clasped at the back of their necks. They knew the drill. He hadn't even gotten to know their names that well. He took another step back, and with the lights glaring in his eyes and the stink of sweat and shame in his nostrils, he let his weapon drop to the deck.

Kincaid was beside him, grinning. From someplace in his holster he pulled out a thin strip of leather, with a badge. "Federal agent, nitwit. Hope you enjoy fatty foods and cement rooms with no views, 'cause you're going in the house for a long, long time."

Fast open boats were approaching, with armed men. The shrimper's diesels were dead and the boat was drifting, and it would only take a moment or two before they were boarded.

"You heard the man," Kincaid said. "Get your hands up."

Slater sighed. "You guys seem to be cursing my life." He punched Kincaid in the face with two brutal, sharp jabs, and then caught him under his chin with his elbow. Kincaid cried out and stumbled backwards, and then overboard. In seconds men were clambering over the side and Slater fell to the deck as they kicked and punched and went at him with their batons, but whatever he felt was only in his heart. Betrayal.

Slater moved only once during the drive out to the house, and that was when the state police cruiser went through the tiny downtown of Thebes. He sat up to get a better view. A wooden sign said: Welcome to Thebes. Enjoy Our Town by Slowing Down. A grassy oval in the center of the town had a Civil War statue, and the oval was surrounded by the road and a couple of churches with tall, white steeples and some shops. Not many cars. A touch-football game was under way near the statue. Most people eyed the cruiser curiously as it drove by. There was even a place that was called a general store. Slater hadn't known those sorts of towns still existed, and he wondered if the peacefulness of this place was something the residents were proud of, or even knew was now quite rare. He thought that anyone who camped out in this town was doing it by choice, and not necessity. Such a gift.

Then they went out to a more rural part of town, and Slater sank deeper into his seat, fists jammed into his coat pockets. Dead leaves blew across the way, and the houses were smaller and set away from the road, which was narrow and bumpy. Some horses and cows were there, pent up behind a fence, and Slater nodded to

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them as they went by. Smoke came up from chimneys and he was amazed at that. Wood still being used to produce heat.

The cruiser slowed as cars began to appear, jammed to the side of the road. There were people lined up who turned and looked at the cruiser, and then came the flash of cameras and Slater saw two television crews. "Keep it moving there, officer," he said. "I don't want to see anybody, and I don't want to be seen."

The back of the neck grew a bit more red. Granger shook his head. The cruiser was waved ahead by two state police troopers, and then they were there. Granger turned and said, "Ready for another day's work?"

Slater opened the door. "It's either that or wait for you to get a heart attack." Outside he stood on muddy grass, disgusted at the chaos he saw. A half-dozen cruisers, ranging from the state and Thebes police to the county sheriff's, and even a dark green one that belonged to something called the Fish & Game Department, were parked in a muddy pasture. Two ambulances were parked under a shedding oak tree, their rear doors open. Cops of all kinds were standing around, cups of coffee in their hands, drinking and jiving, and Slater noted how they all looked over at him, wondering who this guy was, chauffeured up here past the police lines. The road went ahead and curved to the left, and Slater could make out the rear end of a parked Thebes police cruiser.

There. Three vans with darkened windows, parked farther into the pasture but away from the other vehicles, as if they were trying to show that they were separate, better, more skilled than the rest. Slater felt cold and put his hands back into his coat, and started to walk to the vans. Granger fell in beside him.

"My gear ready?" he asked.

"All here," Granger said. "Along with the rest of the squad."

Slater laughed at the remark. "Granger, you fool, any other place or time in the world, this squad would be serving time. Let's get things rolling."

The local cops kept up the eye-gazing, and he saw the knowing nods as he and Granger went to the parked vans. The two of them were now marked. They were outsiders. They were the enemy.

At the van the crew there, including an older man named MacKinnon, were all dressed in black jumpsuits. He was sitting at a table inside one of the vans drinking water from a clear plastic cup. The side door was open and Slater and Granger looked in at him. His moustache was black and white, and save for his eyebrows, was the only hair on his head. Maps and papers

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were on the table and he didn't waste time.

"You ready for another run, Slater?" he asked.

"I am," and Slater felt himself standing tall. The old training, responding to the voice of authority.

"Good," MacKinnon said. "Ron Conrad is still up there. You read the files and field report on the way in?"

Don't tell me how to do my job, Slater thought, and he said, "I did. And his wife and kids?"

MacKinnon paused for a second too long. "We just know about Conrad. He's up there, and he took down one of the local cops. They're pretty pissed off, as you can imagine. So we need to work well, and quick. Just make this one more productive if you can."

Slater turned away. "Just give me my gear."

At the rear of another van, he saw the other members of the squad, huddled around Granger, and he knew from the way they were looking at him that Granger had been telling another story of crazy Slater almost losing it on the flight up here. So what. They all looked the same, beefy men in black, zippered jumpsuits, some with closely trimmed moustaches. Lopez. Sher. Williams. Pinette. And there, standing off by himself, was Grady. His eyes were shiny. Grady always stood by himself, and he nodded at Slater in understanding as Slater went by. At Grady's feet was a long, zippered black duffel bag. Slater ignored him and went to the third van, and there was his gear, as promised. How surprising.

The noise was what got to you after a while, and after some months Slater got a year's worth of yellow foam earplugs from a guy in another block. It was strictly a business deal: the earplugs in exchange for breaking the fingers of a second guy who was getting too persistent in the loving business. It was late in the afternoon and Slater had the plugs in, reading the third volume of Morison's *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, and at first he didn't hear the screw calling out to him.

Then the screw started rapping on the bars with his baton. "Hey. Slater. You got visitors."

He put the book down and took the earplugs out, and almost winced at the rush of noise. The televisions, radios, the yelling and screaming, the banging of bars up on the other level. The plugs were good at blocking out the sound, but there was nothing to block out the stench of men and urine, or to hide the sight of his concrete hole and the uniformed screw out there, eyes glaring.

"I've got what?" Slater asked, surprised. He closed the blue-

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bound volume on a finger, and the screw started to unlatch the door.

"Visitors," the guard said, his face expressing distaste. "And they're coming in here to see you."

The door rattled open and the screw brought in a folding chair. A man in a two-piece dark blue suit sat down, slim black briefcase on his lap. His hair was combed back in some slick mess. Two other men in suits stood behind him, their thick faces impassive, their eyes floating around, assessing threats. Slater tried to swallow. The only visitor he'd had before was his lawyer, and that was in the visitor's section, with thick Plexiglas windows and telephones you talked with. This was unheard of, having a civilian in this part of the block.

The man in the chair looked around at Slater's hole and Slater looked with him, noting how it must appear in that guy's eyes: bunk and thin mattress with Slater on it. Slater wearing blue jeans and denim work shirt, cut off at the sleeves. Stainless-steel toilet and matching sink in one corner. Three sets of narrow shelves on the far wall: two with clothing and the other holding books. Radio and small TV set on another shelf. Wall decorations consisting of a Sierra Club calendar, a *National Geographic* map of the world, and three pictures: Josef Stalin, Malcolm X, and Colin Powell. The man smiled slightly at seeing the pictures.

"What?" the man asked. "No pinups of broads?"

Slater shook his head. "No use torturing myself with something I can't have."

"Then why those three, um, gentlemen?"

He turned and looked up at them. "Because they came into this world with everything against them, sons of poor families, and they fought and changed their world. That's why." The man nodded and opened up the briefcase and took out a folder. "You had hair when this picture was taken. What happened? Lice?"

"Nope. Hair in this place can get you killed. Easy for someone to grab when you don't expect it. Place like this, you need to even the odds as much as you can."

"You were pretty busy when you arrived here. Record says you sent two guys into the infirmary less than a week after you got processed. A personality problem, Slater?"

He put the book down on his bunk, folded his arms. "No problem. It's just that they appreciated me, and wanted to sell me to somebody else here. I refused, fight ensued, and now, nobody bothers me. And excuse me for asking, but who the hell are you?"

"Um, just a minute here," the man said, flipping another page,

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and then putting the folder back in with a satisfied smile. "There. Some record, especially that matter that got you here. Killing a DEA agent and all that."

Slater's voice was flat. "Like I said at the trial, I didn't kill him. I broke his jaw. Not my fault he couldn't swim with a broken jaw."

"No matter. In some circles, it's still considered pretty heavy." The man closed the briefcase. "Slater, I'm from the Department of Defense. We have a problem, and you can help us."

"Why?"

The man smiled slightly. "Besides appealing to your patriotism, how does this sound: You say yes and in an hour you're shaved, showered, and having the best meal of your life. In another three hours you're in Chicago, working for us. Take care of a matter in that town and there may be other opportunities in the future. And the pay is just fine."

Slater chose his words carefully. "Are you talking about eliminating my sentence?"

He shook his head. "Can't do that. Too much of a fuss with your background. But I am talking about a parole, which can become a permanent parole depending on your behavior. You perform this task, and maybe some others, and you'll never come back here."

More noise from upstairs, somebody yelling about missing socks. Slater looked over at the two pieces of muscle providing guard service to the man in the suit. "Sounds too crazy, too weird. Last time I got involved in craziness, I was on a boat with three Cubans and a fat man whose salary was paid by my taxes."

The man shrugged. "Your choice. But I did some checking on the way in here, and dinner tonight is pasta, and breakfast tomorrow is leftovers from dinner. Maybe that's good for here. Or you can have the best steak in your life, or boiled lobster, in an hour. I don't care. But I need an answer."

Slater sat up on the bunk. "What's the job?"

He rapped his fingers on the briefcase. "Man you know is holed up in a hotel in Chicago. There's been some trouble. Says he won't come out unless he speaks to you."

"His name?"

"Poulin. An army buddy of yours. Correct?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, seeing the stars overhead, feeling the coldness of the desert air, the comforting weight of Poulin's feet on his side. Poulin. Some people you lose touch with, you never give it another thought. Other people, well, other people, it didn't matter when was the last time

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you talked or wrote. You were there. Always.

Slater opened his eyes. "You got me. What kind of trouble's he in?"

The man stood up. "We'll tell you when you get to Chicago. In the meantime, you've already been processed out and you belong to us now. How long for you to get your stuff together?"

He looked around at the hole that had been his home for months. "About sixty seconds."

The man nodded. "I'll be waiting outside."

"One more question."

"Yeah?"

Slater got up. "What's your name?"

"Granger," the man said.

In a matter of minutes he was in his gear, not minding that he was sweating, for in a few minutes it wouldn't matter at all. Kevlar helmet, body armor fore and aft, special bulletproof shield with peepholes, 9mm Beretta holstered to his leg with four extra clips, shatterproof goggles and utility belt with handcuffs, two more extra clips, and a riot baton. MacKinnon and Granger and the others walked with him to the edge of the pasture. They knew enough to leave him alone, as did the other cops there, but as he started walking a heavyset man in a dark green police uniform broke through and grabbed Slater's arm.

"What the hell is this trash?" the man hissed. He had on a campaign-style hat with a center badge that said POLICE CHIEF—THEBES, and his eyes were red-rimmed. He looked like a guy who had been awake for forty-eight hours and was scared to fall asleep because of the dreams that awaited him.

Slater jerked his arm away. "Who the hell are you?"

The man's voice rose with each syllable. "Rod Munson, police chief here, and I got one of my best men down over there, gut-shot and dead, and only one of you is going in?"

Slater looked around. MacKinnon and Granger started coming forward and Slater held up his free hand and said, "It sure does look that way, Chief, don't it? Now why don't you let me do my job and you get back there and think of cows or something."

"Why, you uppity—" and the rest of his words hung in the air as Slater flipped up the goggles and stepped forward until he was breathing on the chief's face.

"You got another word or two there you were going to use, Chief?" Slater said, walking forward, using the shield to push the chief away some. "Something else you want to share?"

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The chief had an odd, sneering laugh. "Oh, I don't know. You tell me. I want to say the right things, but your kind always changes your mind. First it's colored, then black, and now African-American. What's the matter, can't make up your mind?"

Slater grinned, making sure his teeth were firmly together. "Maybe we enjoy screwing with simple minds. Gives us something to do when we're not sleeping with your women." The chief choked and moved forward but Slater turned, and without looking, knew that the chief was gone, taken care of. There were some muffled shouts but he didn't care. In a way, he was glad of the stupid interruption. It had focused his mind, and right now, he needed as much focusing as possible. He went up the cracked asphalt road, getting closer to the parked cruiser. Its engine was still rumbling and he could make out the faint static of the police radio. He moved around the car's trunk, not bothering to take cover or do any of the "stealth and evasive" stuff he had learned years before. This was another type of mission, another type of battlefield.

And with other types of casualties. The police officer was on his back, mouth hanging a bit open, eyes wide and staring up into the foliage overhead. His blond hair moved some in the breeze, and he looked to be in his mid twenties. Goodrich had been the poor guy's name, according to the nametag on his chest. His hands were empty and Slater saw that the chief was wrong. He hadn't been gut-shot. He had been taken down with one in the 10-ring, right in the center. Jesus. Good shooting.

Slater looked up at the house. No movement. The green lawn sloped above him, rising up to God knows what. So far there hadn't been any fire, any shouts, any demands. He was making progress. He took a deep breath. The journey was about to begin. He started up the slight rise, trying to ignore the kids' toys lying there unattended. A thought came to him, of who would ever play with these toys again, and he pushed it aside. When he was halfway up the rise, Slater stopped.

"Ron!" Slater yelled out. "Ron Conrad! I'm here to surrender!"

And with that, Slater dropped the shield, tossed the Beretta away, stripped off his helmet, body armor, and utility belt, and dumped it all in a pile. He kept on stripping until he was down to a jumpsuit. He zippered it open, let it lie around his ankles, and then he held out his arms and turned around in a full circle. After a moment or two, he zippered up the jumpsuit and he walked up to the house, knowing that even with the cool fall air about him, he was sweating as if it were August.

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For the first few hours they kept their promises, right up to when they brought him to the hotel in Chicago, and then they surprised him by keeping their word on other matters. After a quiet dinner Slater got a briefing in an empty banquet room, with nearly fifty banquet tables set up with silverware and water jugs. All of the ice in the clear jugs had melted, and there were puddles of water on each table. At the head table the dishes had been piled in a jumble on one end and a water glass had been broken in the process, a jagged shard rising up like a spear. A schematic of the hotel was spread open and some senior Chicago cop was explaining the situation. Slater stood nearby, and Granger stood there, too, arms folded.

"The man is holed up here, in room two-thirty-six," the cop said, pointing at the map with stubby fingers. His hair was crew-cut and he wore a black turtleneck with body armor. "We know of two civilians in the room with him, and we believe they're dead."

Slater blinked hard. "What did you say? Did you say Poulin killed two people in that room?"

The cop looked at Granger. "I thought your man had been briefed."

Granger shook his head. "Just go on, will you? Slater, Poulin is in that room and has been there for almost a day. A room-service clerk and a hotel security officer went into the room, and witnesses heard shots fired. There've been no demands for money or a way out. All he wants to do is to talk to you."

"No more than that?" he asked.

"No more than that," Granger said.

For another half-hour or so, the cop and Granger and others went over the floor plans, discussing fire zones and strategies, but Slater tuned them out, wondering instead who was supposed to be at this banquet tonight. His job was simple: to go in and talk to Poulin, and to see what the hell had gone wrong this fine Chicago evening. Eventually the planning was done and he walked out of the ballroom with Granger and the cop and went down a corridor. Chicago cops in SWAT gear and holding full-body shields let them pass, and Slater almost grinned when he was handed a 9mm semi. Earlier this morning, he had been just another number in the hole. And in a matter of hours, with a full and comfortable belly, he had a gun in his hand. Who would believe it?

He put on a vest and half-listened to the cop and Granger whispering instructions to him, and then he said, "Okay, I'm off. Will you please shut up?"

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Slater started down the hallway, past the closed and locked doors, letting his fingers trace dreamily along the smooth wallpaper, enjoying the rich texture, so different from the rough and slimy concrete he had been used to. Then he was there, at Room 236. The door was shut. Some sort of classical music was playing from inside the room. He looked down the hallway, at the mass of cops and Granger there, behind the mobile barriers, looking at him, expecting him to do something about his old friend Poulin. He raised up his hand to knock on the door, and then he thought, no, something's not right. Ignoring the harsh whispers from up the hallway, he put the pistol down on the floor and covered it with his bulletproof vest. Those items didn't seem to belong.

Then he rapped on the door. "Poulin? It's me, Slater. I was in the area and thought I'd stop by."

Poulin's voice: "Come on in. It's open."

The door was unlocked and that surprised Slater, and the next few minutes were full of a number of surprises. The room was standard hotel, with a bathroom to the left and two large beds in the center of the room. A long, low bureau ran across the right wall, and on the bureau was a television set. The music came from the radio. The television set was on and the sound was off. The bathroom door was open, and a dead man was in there, dressed in black trousers and black shoes, and with a couple of large bath towels covering his chest and head. Another dead man was on the floor next to the beds, with a sheet torn from one of the beds covering everything except his feet. A brown stain the size of his hand marred the top of the sheet, near where the man's head should have been. A room-service tray was on the other bed, and sitting on the windowsill, with window open, was Poulin. He had a drink in one hand and a revolver in the other, and was wearing a Class A, U.S. Army uniform, trousers and dress shirt. His coat—with medals and service ribbons—hung off the back of a chair.

"Lucky for you," Slater said. "You managed to stay in."

Poulin smiled. "Good to see you, too. Close the door, will you?"

Slater closed the door behind him and looked over at Poulin. It had been some years since their travels to Kuwait and Iraq, but he still looked about the same. A few more pounds around the middle, and his short brown hair had a few streaks of gray, but it was the same old Poulin, with laugh lines about the eyes and a perpetual half-smile. Slater continued to look at Poulin. He didn't want to look at the mess on the floor.

Poulin took a sip from his drink. "Sorry to hear about your trou-

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bles, Slater. I only found out last night, when I asked for you. They said you were doing some heavy time and it'd be a bitch to get you here, but then I told them I'd start popping at people in the streets if they didn't try. If they did get you here, I'd just sit still and not bother anybody. So. Here you are. Hell of a mess, hunh?"

Slater looked around the room, conscious now of the smell, and remembering how he had tasted that odor before, while searching out bunkers out in the desert. "Hell of a mess," Slater agreed. "What's going on?"

Poulin shrugged. "Something strange, my friend. You know what? I just killed these two men, and it doesn't bother me. And that's what's bothering me."

"What?"

He motioned. "Have a drink. And I'll tell you a story."

The look in Ron Conrad's eyes reminded Slater of the last time he saw Poulin, and that was scary indeed. He was in the man's kitchen, and on the kitchen table were two revolvers, a pistol, and a shotgun. Conrad's wife Carol was sitting in a chair in the corner, and near her was a coat rack. Another shotgun was in Conrad's hands. He sat in a kitchen chair watching Slater drink a glass of orange juice. The kitchen had cracked flowered linoleum and school papers were hanging from the refrigerator by little magnets in the shape of flowers and bumblebees. A wooden sign on the wall said in bright red letters: *Kiss the cook!* In the center of the kitchen was a battered wooden table. Slater sat at one end. Conrad was at the other. He looked just like the photo, with moustache and receding hairline. Conrad was buttering a piece of toast with his free hand and said again, "So who are you working for?"

"Your former employer. The U.S. government."

Conrad nodded. "Thought as much. Nobody would be crazy enough to come up the lawn like that unless he was working for the feds. The locals wouldn't even dream of pulling stuff like that. Hey. You feel like eating?"

Slater shook his head. "Sorry. Had breakfast on the way here."

The man had on jeans and a simple black T-shirt, and his eyes were calm, which to anyone but Slater would be surprising, considering the situation. "Well, I can't say I'm not happy you said no. Can't really cook you anything, considering the circumstances. And Carol, of course."

Slater looked at Conrad's wife. "Of course." Carol Conrad was sprawled in a matching wooden chair, wearing a fuzzy pink

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bathrobe, her arms hanging loosely by her sides. The front of the bathrobe was torn and stained, and the woman's eyes were closed. She had not moved once since Slater had entered the house. A pink slipper was on one foot and the other foot was bare. The toenails had been painted some time ago.

"Why are you here?" Conrad said, biting into the toast. "Here to arrest me?"

"No, not at all. I'm looking for information. Looking to help. Thought I'd ask a few questions."

Conrad chewed some of the toast, swallowed. "Ask away."

"Was your wife the first one?"

He tore off another piece of toast. "Yep. Yesterday morning, it was. She was jawing on about something from the kitchen and then, well, I can't explain it. Something happened."

Slater spoke up. "It was like a lightbulb going off in your head, and then everything was clear, as clear as ice."

The man smiled. Carol Conrad still didn't move. "Exactly right. I was thinking, it was like looking at the spring ice, out on the brook down by the property line. So clear and hard you think it'll last forever. Then I left the living room and loaded up with my .357 Ruger and came back out into the kitchen. Carol moved away from the stove, knife in her hand, and I shot her."

Slater nodded, refusing to let himself look at the dead woman, forcing himself to ask the next question. "Your children. Jonathan and Ann. Are they . . . Are they in the house?"

Conrad smiled. "Of course. Upstairs in their bedrooms. They were screaming and coming after me after their mother was taken care of, and well—" Conrad almost looked embarrassed "—what happened, happened. They're both upstairs in their rooms."

Slater encouraged him. "How long before the police arrived?"

"Oh, about fifteen minutes or so. One of my neighbors, Molly Grace, maybe, must've heard the shooting and yelling. So Sam Goodrich, a wonderful guy, he showed up in his cruiser. He coaches Little League in his off-hours. My boy Jonathan's on his team, and well, he came out of that cruiser, gun in hand, and I took him down before he got three steps up the lawn. Quite a go-getter, that one."

Slater rubbed his chin. "Reactions are still pretty good, Conrad."

"Yep." He finished off another piece of toast. "Now. Fair's fair. I've answered some of your questions. You answer some of mine. Why are you here? Besides being so helpful, I mean. Why does the government want to be here in Thebes, New Hampshire?"

Slater leaned forward in his chair, glad that Carol Conrad's eyes

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were closed. "Let me tell you one thing about you, and you tell me if I'm wrong or not. Then I'll answer your questions."

"Sure," Conrad said. He lowered the shotgun some. "Go ahead."

"You were in the army during our Persian Gulf adventure. Special operations group. Did some behind-the-lines work. Right?"

Conrad nodded. "Quite. And don't bother asking me what I did back there. Even Carol never knew everything."

"All right," Slater said. "Before you went in-country, you had a lot of medical exams, right? Inoculation shots. Needles and such."

"That's right." Conrad cocked his head. "How do you know that?"

"Because I was there, in the same sandbox."

Conrad's face lit up. "Really?"

"Really," Slater said. "Did some of the same back-border work, calling in air strikes at night on Iraqi convoys. And I remember before we went in, they inoculated us with everything under the sun. Nobody knew what Saddam might send screaming our way, and we all got inoculated. But something different happened to you, Conrad. I'll bet you anything that twenty-four hours after one series of shots, you came down with a killer headache. Saw lights in your eyes. Your feet and hands twitched, and you felt terribly thirsty. Am I right?"

"God, I almost forgot that, till you reminded me. Man, what a headache. Worst one I've ever had in my life."

"And in another day, you were better. Just woke up and you felt refreshed, like you had the best sleep of your life. And you forgot about it after a while. Right?"

Conrad nodded, and then put down the piece of toast and Whipquick, brought the shotgun up so the barrel was pointing at Slater's chest. Slater tried not to move, tried not to think of what would happen to his head if the pellets came out at close range.

"Right you are," Conrad said, his voice lower. "And now that I'm remembering, I just put something together. You're here because of those shots, right? The government gave me something, right?"

Slater nodded, sweat trickling down his back.

"You're right," he said. " There was a screwup."

There were a few long moments, and the shotgun barrel wavered. Conrad smiled again. "It being the government, I couldn't expect anything else. You got more to tell me?"

"I do."

"Then go on."

By now he was on the bed, though Poulin insisted on staying on

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the windowsill, next to the open window, the breeze blowing in the drapes that sometimes shrouded his shoulders.

"It was a screwup," Poulin said. "The screwup of the decade, and some people are still busy trying to keep it quiet, years later. I'm glad you didn't have that medical reaction in the desert. Means to me that you didn't get that particular inoculation. But you got a few minutes so I can tell you a story?"

"Go ahead," Slater said, glad that he was sitting so that he couldn't spot the two corpses. "I've got plenty of time. Maybe you can show me the stars again."

Poulin seemed to think that was funny, and he laughed for a bit. Slater joined him and then Poulin said, "Too many damn city lights for stars around here, and if you stay here too long, the entire Chicago PD is gonna come busting through that door. No, this will all be done when I'm finished talking. All right?"

Slater nodded. "You got it."

"Good," Poulin said, crossing one arm over another. "I guess it began about a year ago, when I started working on an article for *Army Times* about the preparations for the Gulf War. I was curious about the planning that went on, and also about the medical challenges we faced, especially the inoculations we all received. I remember one of those shots, and how I had a reaction that knocked me on my butt for a day."

Poulin shook his head in what looked like amazement. "You'll be surprised at how hard it was, getting some of those records. How quickly we all forget. Remember the yellow ribbons? The 'Support Our Troops' bumper stickers? The gift packages and mail that was sent to 'Any Serviceman'? Hmm? Remember that?"

"I do," Slater said. "But I guess I'm a minority."

Poulin laughed. "Nice pun. Yeah, not many people remember. They all wanted to forget. They all tease us about beating up a weak bully who was a walkover. Hunh? Some walkover. You and me and others who were there, we knew it wasn't a walkover. We didn't know what we were up against, from nerve gas to mines, and we still pulled off our quickest military victory of this century. But because some people who weren't there thought we should have gone further, and other politicians whose views change with the wind thought we weren't tough enough, it was all forgotten. Poof. And in a couple of years, those heroes — including you, my friend — were dumped in the street. So sorry. A shortage of enemies so off you go to work at McDonald's. Some thanks, right?"

Slater was careful, not wanting to get Poulin angry, but also

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wanting to get him back on track. "So you looked at your medical records. What happened?"

"What happened is that they were in black land, my friend, the land of spooks and spies. They did not exist. I won't bore you with the details on how I found out what happened, but here's what I was able to learn. Me and a bunch of unknown others over there were victims of a medical-lab error, that's what happened."

"The shots?"

"Only one shot, a very special one. Don't you remember what it was like back then? We were sending over supplies on wheezing ships that broke down. We didn't have enough of the right gear, hell, the uniform makers were working overtime. And we didn't have enough inoculations on hand for whatever nasties Saddam had planned for us. So the rush was on, and by mistake, some medical lab on contract to the D-O-D sent the wrong batch of some infernal thing out to Saudi and bingo, me and who knows how many other grunts got shots of some stuff that hadn't even been tested on lab animals. Pretty funny, right?"

Slater's mouth was dry. He remembered receiving inoculations against all sorts of supposed bio-warfare weapons. Some of them were still experimental, and there were some low laughs about being lab animals. Some funny.

"Wait," Poulin said. "It even gets better. The head lab guy back in the States catches up on the mistake a month or two later, and tries to burn some records. He's been drinking and passes out, and in addition to the records, he also gets snuffed. The army's records got destroyed when a Scud hit the wrong building in Dhahran, and so the best the army knows is that at least ten of us got these shots, and maybe even a hundred. Or a thousand. Either way, they're not too eager to broadcast this info, as you can see."

Slater looked around the room, trying not to breathe through his nose. "And that shot you got, that caused you to do this?"

Poulin nodded. "Exactly. Though I pulled the trigger, Slater, someone else loaded the gun."

Slater said to Conrad, "You were injected with something called memory RNA. You ever hear of it?"

The shotgun barrel was still steady, pointing at Slater's chest. "No, I haven't. But I'm sure you'll tell me, right?"

"Absolutely." Slater willed his hands to stop shaking. "This high-tech lab in Maryland, on contract to the government, managed to create a way of injecting thoughts and memories into people,

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using memory RNA. They think that's the stuff in your brain that makes you retain memories. At first it was just supposed to help in the training process. Why waste money training a radar tech or an engine-repair crewman, when you can inject him with memory RNA and he becomes an expert in less than an hour?"

Conrad's eyes were staring right at him. "Something tells me I wasn't injected with a lesson plan on how to fieldstrip an M-60."

Slater slowly nodded, trying hard not to look at Mrs. Conrad's white and puffy face. It looked like a couple of ants were traveling across her upper lip. "That's right. Some bright boy took that one step forward. Make the perfect soldier. A killer that would take out anyone he perceived as an enemy, who would do it quickly and without remorse. All this in one hypodermic shot. Not bad, hunh? You and God knows how many other grunts accidentally got injected with this when you went to Saudi."

The man lowered the shotgun and looked over at his dead wife, and then looked back at Slater. "So that's why I feel fine, right?"

"That's right."

"But why now? Hell, that was years ago."

"Triggering phrase," Slater said. "The memory is triggered by a code word or phrase. You hear that phrase and you become . . . well, you become what you were designed to become. Any threat, anything that comes near you that may hurt you, is killed. You kill, and there're no feelings of guilt, or of sadness. You just kill anything you perceive as a threat. All you see are targets."

Conrad smiled. "Which is why you came up the lawn and got undressed like that."

"Exactly."

"So why today?"

"You heard the code phrase. Some word or words. Do you remember what they were?"

Conrad shook his head. "No, not a thing. I just remember being in the living room and . . . something happened. Everything seemed so clear, so right. I got my weapon. Then I was in the kitchen and Carol looked up and she had the knife, and well, everything started from there."

Slater felt just a slight pang of disappointment. This was his fourth mission, and each time, the same answer. There was just one more thing to do, but then Conrad beat him to it.

"Then why are you here?"

Slater looked at him. "I'm here to get you out."

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The breeze picked up and the drapes still flapped about Poulin. He said, "I have an idea of why they sent you in here, Slater."

"And why's that?"

"To debrief me. To find out what happened and what I know. They'll want you to tell them that in exchange for you staying out of jail. And as for everything else, well, I don't have any illusions."

"What?"

Poulin smiled and made a shushing noise, holding the barrel of the revolver to his lips. "I'm a soldier, Slater, and I know what's going to happen. Funny thing, isn't it, when you and I give our true oath and allegiance to our country, and this is how they pay us back. A strange world, with even stranger promises. Now. Listen to me. When you get out there, don't tell them everything. Keep something back. You and I, we trusted in them, and look where it got us. You understand?"

The room felt colder and he was starting to shiver. "I understand."

Conrad looked puzzled. "After all that I've done, you're going to get me out? I'm not under arrest?"

"No," Slater said. "Not at all."

"But I heard the sirens. There must be dozens of cops out there. This place must be surrounded."

"You're right," Slater said. "But we're the feds, Conrad. We've wired this country and each time there's a strange incident like this, and we find out the guy's a Gulf vet, we're here in half a day. We're here for a reason. We're here to get you out. Do you think the feds want this story to become public? We'll tell the locals that we're taking you into custody, and in less than a half-hour you'll be flown out of here to an air force installation in Nevada."

"Then what?"

Slater leaned forward. "Debriefing and testing time, my friend. They want to find out just what makes you go. You'll be interviewed, reinterviewed, and everything you have, from blood to spinal fluid, will be tested and retested. You're very valuable, Conrad, and they want to reconstruct what was injected into you. Don't think they're helping you out of the goodness of their hearts. They're doing this to find out what went wrong, and how they can make it better the next time around."

Conrad slowly nodded. "Then when can we leave?"

"Right after you give me some information," Slater said, wishing he hadn't finished that orange juice so quickly, for his mouth was now quite dry. "The government has no real records of what went

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on, like I told you. So the question is, what do you remember? Anybody else over there that you recall had the same injections, the same reaction? The headache, the tingling of the limbs?"

The man put down his shotgun and rubbed at his jaw. "Yeah, I do remember. Two guys in my squad. It seemed strange, that we'd be getting sick right together like that. Come with me for a sec."

Slater followed Conrad into the living room, which was off the kitchen. A television set was on in the corner, but Conrad ignored it and went to a set of bookshelves, built over a couch. He knelt on the couch and rummaged along until he pulled out a thick manilla envelope. Conrad dumped the envelope's contents on the sofa and started going through a collection of papers and photographs.

"Funny thing, isn't it?" Conrad said. "After the war was over we were treated like heroes, with parades and newspaper stories. Then, all it took was one summer and they forgot about us. Cousin of mine in Pennsylvania, he was in the Marine Corps. When the war was on, the state was going to give each vet a bonus. But a year later they changed. Budget problems. Always, there's budget problems. Is that our fault?"

"It happens," Slater said, looking around the wood-paneled room, not allowing his eyes to linger on the family portraits on the television set and on the walls. The young boy, Jonathan, in his Little League uniform. The girl, Ann, with some sheep and holding a 4-H blue ribbon. And the wedding photo of Ron and Carol Conrad, smiling and so very confident that everything would be fine.

"Yeah," Conrad said, picking up a photograph. "Seems like we belong on a long list of forgotten ones. You know, I was in Boston a couple of months ago; I couldn't believe the beggars, on every street corner. What's happening to a place that lets that go on?"

"Whatever happens, you can be sure we deserve it," Slater said. "You find something?"

"Here," Conrad said, passing over a color photograph. "Me and a group of buddies, about a month before the ground war started. That's me in the center. Kyte, there on the right, and Gosselin, last guy on the left, they got sick too. Man, the headaches we got . . ."

Slater looked at the photograph of the young men in camouflage gear that was nicknamed chocolate chips for its colors and patterns. The men were tanned or dark-skinned, muscular and confident in what they were doing, and three of them were carrying something awful in their bloodstreams. Kyte and Gosselin, Slater thought. After a little records check, you join the list, and one of these days, I'll be coming by for a visit, and we'll talk.

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"Thanks," Slater said aloud. He zippered open the jumpsuit and put the photo in an inside pocket. "Ready to leave?"

Conrad looked around at the living room. "I guess I am. It feels . . . It feels, strange, you know? I've spent most of my life in this house. Where do you live, Slater?"

He shrugged. "Never really in one place. Apartments and base housing, back then. Now, mostly hotels, here and there. Not a bad life, once you get used to it. Room-service food is pretty good, if you're not paying for it."

Conrad smiled. "I feel sorry for you. This house is two hundred years old and once belonged to my grandparents. That makes you feel real good. Do you think I'll ever come back?"

"No," Slater said.

The man shrugged. "Oh, well. Let's get going then."

And as Slater turned and was going out, he looked at the television set again.

Good God.

Poulin waved the revolver around again. "You should be going. Any longer and there might be a firefight in this room, and you might be caught. Don't want that to happen. You get out of here and kiss butt and do whatever it takes so you don't get sent back in. That's an order. You're worth more on the outside."

Slater tried to choose his words carefully. "You can come along. I'm sure there are people out there who want to talk to you."

He smiled. "Little problem about that, Slater. It's those two corpses over there. I don't feel one damn thing about having killed them, about ruining their families' lives, and that's not the kind of person I want to be. Now, since I've been promoted, I'm your superior, Slater, and I'm telling you to get the hell out."

He stood up, feeling his palms sweat with helplessness. "What are you going to do, Poulin?"

His friend smiled. "Only thing left. My duty."

Out on the green grass of the lawn Conrad sighed and said, "Man, it sure is good to be outside, feel the wind on my face. I don't like being cooped up in there."

Slater walked beside him, stepping over a child's ball, thankful that he was finally out of that house, and feeling sorry for the cleanup squad which would be going through there in a matter of moments. Mrs. Conrad was one thing, but the two children . . . Slater doubted that even he could do that job.

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"You feel all right?" Slater asked.

"Feel great," Conrad said, walking in long strides. "Hungry, though. Do you think I'll be getting something to eat soon?"

Slater could not gaze at him. He looked down at the road and the parked police cruisers that were waiting. "I'm sure everything will be just fine. Look, do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure."

"Let me hold your hand."

"What?"

"Just for a moment. I just want to hold on, just for a second."

Conrad laughed. "Sure. Why not."

Slater held the man's rough hand and squeezed it, and then he stopped walking and forced himself to look at the smiling face, the calm expression, the man and citizen who had been sent thousands of miles away to do his country's bidding, and who was about to be rewarded by a grateful nation.

"Sorry," Slater said, and the top of Conrad's head was blown off.

And as he turned to walk out of the hotel room, there came the sound of wind coming through the open window, and a slight thump, and Slater turned just in time to see Poulin as he gracefully fell backwards out of the room.

So now he was back with the vans and MacKinnon and Granger, and there was Grady over by the oak tree, a self-satisfied smile on his face, cleaning his sniper's rifle. One shot, one problem solved, was Grady's motto, and no matter how macho they thought they were, no one in the group enjoyed being with him. At least Poulin, God bless him, had managed to escape Grady's touch.

Most of the cruisers and the two ambulances had left the field and had streamed up to the house, parking in the driveway or on the road near the police cruiser where the dead cop lay. Slater caught the eye of the police chief for a moment and you would think the man would be happy, the way things had turned out, but his face was wrapped in a red scowl.

Slater was with MacKinnon and Granger, standing before the open door of the van, and as they discussed post-action debriefing and disposals, Slater's legs trembled and he remembered:

Televisions.

The television set had been on in Poulin's hotel room. And it had also been on in Conrad's living room. And while he wasn't sure, Slater was almost positive that television sets had also been

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turned on in the other two cases he had been involved with, in Dearborn and Los Gatos.

Televisions. A phrase said over one of the channels, on some program, must have been the code trigger. And with some luck and tracking, he'd be able to find out what programs were being aired the times that the four men went homicidal, and then he'd look for a common sentence or phrase, and then he'd know.

"Slater," came the sharp voice of MacKinnon. "One more time. Are you sure that Conrad had no information, nothing at all about other personnel who may have received the same inoculation?"

Slater smiled. "Not a word."

Granger said, "I don't like this, not one bit. This is the fourth time out, and each time we've come back with nothing. No leads, no names, nothing. I don't like it."

"What do you mean by 'we,' Granger?"

Granger turned, his face even more ruddy. "You watch your attitude, Slater. One word from us and you're back in the joint, relearning the joys of man-to-man love."

"Last I heard, Lincoln freed the slaves."

"Maybe so, but we're making an exception in your case, Slater. You work for us and get some results, or it's back to prison."

Slater was going to reply when MacKinnon interrupted. "Look. Stop the bickering. It's not helping our mission. Slater, you're free to go. That state police cruiser will take you back to the airport, and you'll get a bonus this week for your work. And maybe next time, we'll have some luck. We'll be in touch."

Slater briefly touched the pocket where he had hidden the photograph, and looked at the men about him. He smiled up at MacKinnon. He had the names, soon he would have the code word, and right before him were a number of very pleasant targets.

"Maybe next time I'll be in touch," Slater said, and he walked to the waiting police cruiser, thinking: promises. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 123

"I called a priest," Captain Weeks said. "I asked him to meet me in Pritchard's room. I didn't tell him why. But when Pritchard opened his eyes, he thought it was his last chance to confess before meeting his Maker. And that's what he did."

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BY DOUG ALLYN

The Thief of Nothing
BY JEFFRY SCOTT

Drowned Ophelia
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BY ED GORMAN

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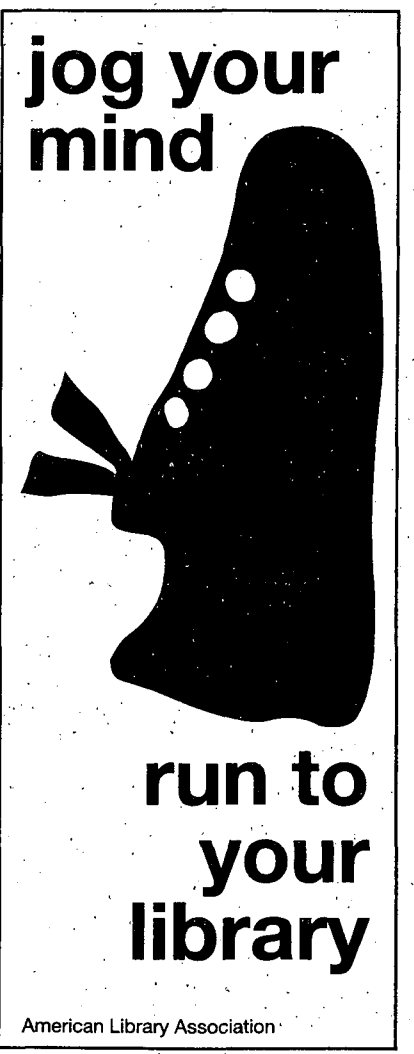

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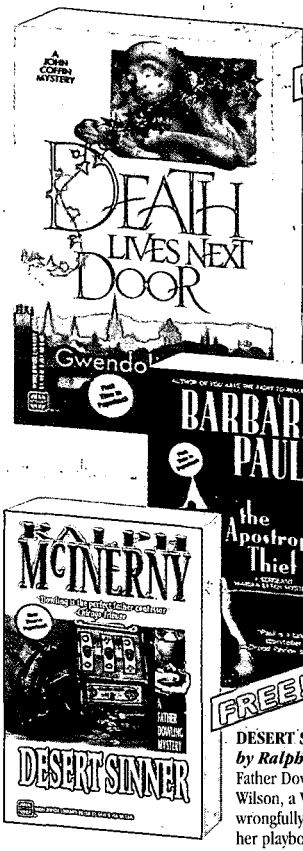

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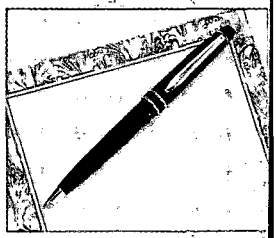

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